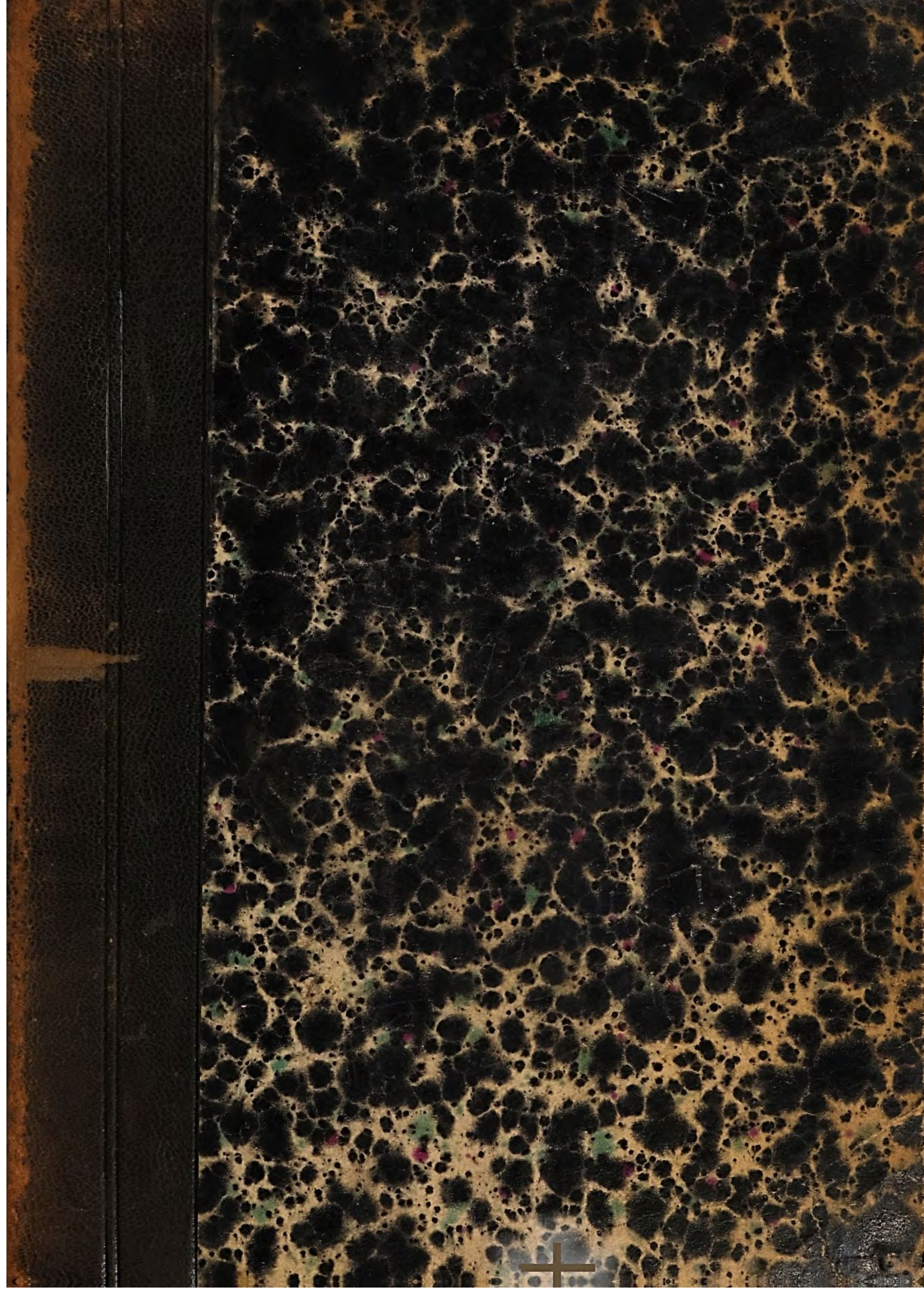




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VOL. 2922.

THE SORCERESS BY MRS. OLIPHANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE SORCERESS.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF "THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1893.



THE SORCERESS.

CHAPTER I.

It was the most exciting event which had ever occurred in the family, and everything was affected by it.

Imagine to yourselves such a young family, all in the very heyday of life, parents and children alike. It is true that Mrs. Kingsward was something of an invalid, but nobody believed that her illness was anything very serious, only a reason why she should be taken abroad, to one place after another, to the great enjoyment of the girls, who were never so happy as when they were travelling and gaining, as they said, experience of life. She was not yet forty, while Charlie was twenty-one and Bee nineteen, so that virtually they were all of the same age, so to speak, and enjoyed everything together—mamma by no means put aside into the ranks of the dowagers, but going everywhere and doing everything just like the rest, and as much admired as anyone.

To be sure she had not been able to walk about so much this time, and had not danced once, except a single turn with Charlie, which brought on a palpitation, so that she declared with a laugh that her dancing days were over. Her dancing days over! Considering how fond she had always been of dancing, the three young people laughed over this, and did not take the least alarm. Mamma had always been the ringleader in everything, even in the romps with the little ones at home. For you must not think that these three were all of the family by any means.

Bee and Betty were the eldest of I can't at this moment tell how many, who were safe in the big nursery at Kingswarden under the charge (very partial) of papa, and the strict and steady rule of nurse, who was a personage of high authority in the house. Papa had but lately left "the elder ones," as he called them, including his pretty wife—and had gone back to his work, which was that of an official at the Horse Guards, in some military department of which I don't even know the name, for I doubt whether the Intelligence Department, which satisfies all the necessities of description, had been invented in those days.

Colonel Kingsward was a distinguished officer, and the occasion of great *éclat* to the little group when he showed himself at their head, drawing round him a sort of cloud of foreign officers wherever he went, which Bee and Betty appreciated largely, and to which Mrs. Kingsward herself did not object; for they all liked the clank of spurs, as was natural, and the

endless ranks of partners, attendants in the gardens, and general escort and retinue thus provided. It was not, however, among these officers, red, blue, green, and white—of all the colours in the rainbow—that Bee had found her fate. For I need scarcely say it was a proposal which had turned everything upside down and filled the little party with excitement.

A proposal! The first in the family! Mamma's head was as much turned by it as Bee's. She lay on the sofa in her white dressing-gown, so flushed with happiness and amusement and excitement, that you would have supposed it was she who was to be the bride.

And then it was so satisfactory a thing all round. If ever Mrs. Kingsward had held anyone at arm's length in her life it was a certain captain of Dragoons who had clanked about everywhere after her daughters and herself for three weeks past. The moment they had appeared anywhere, even at the springs, where she went to drink her morning glass of disagreeable warm water, at the concert in the afternoon, in "the rooms" at night, not to speak of every picnic and riding party, this tall figure would jump up like a jack-in-a-box. And there was no doubt that the girls were rather pleased than otherwise to see him jump up. He was six foot two at least, with a moustache nearly a yard long, curling in a tawny and powerful twist over his upper lip. He had half-a-dozen medals on his breast; his uniform was a compound of white and silver, with a helmet that literally blazed in the sun, and his spurs clanked louder than any other

spurs in the gardens. The only thing that was wanting to him was a very little thing—a thing that an uninstructed English person might not have thought of at all—but which was a painful thing in his own troubled consciousness, and in that of the regiment, and even was doubtful to the English friends who had picked up, as was natural, all the prejudices of the class into which their own position brought them.

Poor Captain Kreutzner, I blush to say it, had no “Von” to his name. Nobody could deny that he was a distinguished officer, the hope of the army in his branch of the service; but when Mrs. Kingsward thought how the Colonel would look if he heard his daughter announced as Madame Kreutzner *tout court* in a London drawing-room, her heart sank within her, and a cold perspiration came out upon her forehead. “And I don’t believe Bee would care,” she cried, turning to her son for sympathy.

Charlie was so well brought up a young man that he cared very much, and gave his mother all the weight of his support. His office it was to beguile Captain Kreutzner as to the movements of the party, to keep off that bold dragoon as much as was possible; when, lo! all their precautions were rendered unnecessary by the arrival of the real man from quite another quarter, at once, and in a moment cutting the Captain out!

There was one thing Mrs. Kingsward could never be sufficiently thankful for in the light of after events, and that was, that it was Colonel Kingsward himself who introduced Mr. Aubrey Leigh to the family. He

was a young man who was travelling for the good of his health, or rather for the good of his mind, poor fellow, as might be seen at a glance. He was still in deep mourning when he presented himself at the hotel, and his countenance was as serious as his hatband. Nevertheless, he had not been long among them before Bee taught him how to smile, even to laugh, though at first with many hesitations and rapid resuming of a still deeper tinge of gravity, as if asking pardon of some beloved object for whom he would not permit even himself to suppose that he had ceased to mourn. This way he had of falling into sudden gravity continued with him even when it was evident that every decorum required from him that he should cease to mourn. Perhaps it was one of the things that most attracted Bee, who had a touch of the sentimental in her character, as all young ladies had in those days, when Mrs. Hemans and L. E. L. were the favourite poets whom young ladies were expected to read. Well brought up girls were not permitted, I need not say, to read Byron. Shelley was a name of fear, and the poems of Mr. Thomas Campbell, not to say Mr. Thomas Moore (carefully selected) were likely to promote that quality.

The pale young man, with his black coat, his hatband, his look of melancholy, drove out the image of the Captain at once from Bee's mind. She had perhaps had enough of captains, fine uniforms, spurs, and all. They had become what modern levity calls a drug in the market. They made *Fenster* parade all day long under her windows; they thronged upon

her steps in the gardens; they tore the flounces from her tarlatan into pieces at the balls. It was something far more original to sit out in the moonlight and look at the moon with a sorrowful young hero, who gradually woke up into life under her hand. Poor, poor boy!—so young and so melancholy!—who had gone through so much!—who was really so handsome when the veil of grief began to blow away!—who had such a pretty name!

Bee was only nineteen. She had mocked and charmed and laughed at a whole generation of young officers, thinking of nothing but picnics and dinner parties and balls. She wanted something new upon which to try her little hand—and now it was thrown, just when she felt the need, in her way. She had turned a young fool's head several times, so that the operation had lost its charm. But to bring a sad man back to life, to drive away sorrow, to teach him to hold up his head again, to learn how sweet it was to live and smile, and ride and run about this beautiful world, and wake every day to a new pleasure—that was something she felt worthy of a woman's powers. And she did it with such effect that Mr. Aubrey Leigh went on improving for three weeks more, and finally ended up with that proposal which was to the Kingsward family in general the most amusing, the most exciting, the most delightful incident in the world.

And yet, of course, it was attended with a certain amount of anxiety which in her—temporarily—invalid state was not very good for mamma. Everybody in-

sisted on all occasions that it was a most temporary state, and that by the end of the summer she would be all right—the palpitations quite calmed down, the flush—which made her so pretty—a little subdued, and herself as strong as ever. But in the meantime this delightful romantic incident, which certainly acted upon her like a glass of champagne, raising her spirits, brought her some care as well. Her first interview was of course with Bee, and took place in the privacy of her chamber, where she cross-examined her daughter as much as was compatible with the relations between them—which indeed were rather those of companions and comrades than of mother and daughter.

“Now, Bee, my dear child,” she said, “remember you have always been a little rover, and Mr. Leigh is so quiet. Do you think you really, really, can devote yourself to him, and never think of another man all your life?”

“Mamma,” said Bee, “if you were not such a dear I should think you were very insulting. Another man! Why, where should I find another man in the world that was fit to tie Aubrey’s shoe?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Kingsward, dubiously; but she added, after a moment, “You know, darling, that’s not quite the question. If you did find in the after ages a man that perhaps was—fit to tie Mr. Leigh’s shoe?”

“Why in all this world, *petite mère*, will you go on calling him Mr. Leigh?”

“Well, well,” said Mrs. Kingsward; “but I don’t feel,” she said again, after a moment’s hesitation,

“that I ought to go so far as to call him Aubrey until we have heard from papa.”

“What could papa find to object to?” said Bee. “Why, it was he who introduced him to us! We should not have known Aubrey, and I should never have been the happiest girl in the world, if it had not been for papa. Dear papa! I know what he’ll say: ‘I can’t understand, my dear, why you should hesitate for a moment. Of course, you don’t suppose I should have introduced Mr. Leigh to my family without first ascertaining, &c., &c.’ That, of course, is what papa will say.”

“I dare say you are right, Bee. It is quite what I expect, for, of course, a man with girls knows what it is, though for my part I confess I always thought it would be a soldier—Captain Kreutzner or Otto von——”

“Mamma!” cried Bee, almost violently, light flashing out of the blue eyes, which were so bright even on ordinary occasions as to dazzle the beholder—you may imagine what fire came out of them now—“as if I should ever have looked twice at one of those big, brainless, clinking and clanking Germans. (N.B.—Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not tall.) No! Though I may like foreigners well enough because it’s amusing to talk their language and to feel that one has such an advantage in knowing German and all that—yet, when it comes to be a question of spending one’s life, an Englishman for me!”

Thus, it will be seen, Bee forestalled the patriotic sentiments of a later generation by resolving, in spite

of all temptations, to belong to other nations—to select an Englishman for her partner in life. It is doubtful, however, how far this virtuous resolution had existed in her mind before the advent of Aubrey Leigh.

“I am sure I am very glad, Bee,” said her mother, “for I always had a dread that you would be snatched off somewhere to—Styria or Delecarlia, or heaven knows where—(these were the first out-of-the-way names that came to Mrs. Kingsward’s mind; but I don’t know that they were altogether without reference or possibilities), where one would have had no chance of seeing you more than once in two or three years. I am very thankful it is to be an Englishman—or at least I shall be,” she added, with a sigh of suspense, “as soon as I have heard from papa——”

“One would think, *Mütterchen*, that you were frightened for papa.”

“I shouldn’t like you ever to try and go against him, Bee!”

“Oh, no,” said Bee, lightly, “of course I shouldn’t think of going against him—is the inquisition over?—for I promised,” she said, with a laugh and a blush, “to walk down with Aubrey as far as the river. He likes that so much better than those noisy blazing gardens, with no shade except under those stuffy trees—and so do I.”

“Do you really, Bee? I thought you thought it was so nice sitting under the trees——”

“With all the *gnädige* Fraus knitting, and all the *wohlgeborne* Herrs smoking. No, indeed, I always hated it!” said Bee.

She jumped up from where she had been sitting on a stool by her mother's sofa, and took her hat, which she had thrown down on the table. It was a broad, flexible, Leghorn hat, bought in Florence, with a broad blue ribbon—the colour of her eyes, as had often been said—floating in two long streamers behind. She had a sash of the same colour round the simple waist of her white frock. That is how girls were dressed in the early days of Victoria. These were the days of simplicity, and people liked it, seeing it was the fashion, as much as they liked crinolines and chignons when such ornamental arrangements “came in.” It does not become one period to boast itself over another, for fashion will still be lord—or lady—of all.

Mrs. Kingsward looked with real pleasure at her pretty daughter, thinking how well she looked. She wore very nearly the same costume herself, and she knew that it also looked very well on her. Bee's eyes were shining, blazing with brightness and happiness and love and fun and youth. She was not a creature of perfect features, or matchless beauty, as all the heroines were in the novels of her day, and she was conscious of a great many shortcomings from that high standard. She was not tall enough—which, perhaps, however, in view of the defective stature of Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not so great a disadvantage—and she was neither fair enough nor dark enough for a Minna or a Brenda, the definite and distinct blonde and brunette, which were the ideal of the time; and she was not at all aware that her irregularity, and

her mingling of styles, and her possession of no style in particular, were her great charms. She was not a great beauty, but she was a very pretty girl with the additional attraction of those blue diamonds of eyes, the sparkle of which, when my young lady was angry or when she was excited in any more pleasurable way, was a sight to see.

"All that's very well, my dear," said Mrs. Kingsward, "but you've never answered my question: and I hope you'll make quite, quite sure before it's all settled that you do like Aubrey Leigh above everybody in the world."

"*A la bonne heure,*" said Bee; "you have called him Aubrey at last, without waiting to know what papa will say:" with which words she gave her mother a flying kiss, and was gone in a moment, thinking very little, it must be allowed, of what papa might say.

Mrs. Kingsward lay still for a little, and thought it all over after Bee was gone. She knew a little better than the others what her Colonel was, and that there were occasions on which he was not so easy to deal with as all the young ones supposed. She thought it all over from the moment that young Mr. Leigh had appeared on the scene. What a comfort it was to think that it was the Colonel himself who had introduced him! Of course, as Bee said, before presenting anyone to his wife and family, Colonel Kingsward would have ascertained, &c., &c. It was just how he would write no doubt. Still, a man may introduce another to his wife and family

without being ready at once to accept him as a son-in-law. On the other hand, Colonel Kingsward knew well enough what is the possible penalty of such introductions. Young as Bee was, she had already attracted a good deal of attention, though this was the first time it had actually come to an offer. But Edward must surely have thought of that. She was, though it seemed so absurd, and though Bee had laughed at it, a little afraid of her husband. He had never had any occasion to be stern, yet he had it in him to be stern; and he would not hesitate to quench Bee's young romance if he thought it right. And, on the other hand, Bee, though she was such a little thing, such a child, so full of fun and nonsense, had a spirit which would not yield as her mother's did. Mrs. Kingsward drew another long fluttering sigh before she got up reluctantly in obedience to her maid, who came in with that other white gown, not unlike Bee's, over her arm, to dress her mistress. She would have liked to lie still a little longer, to have finished the book she was reading, to have thought over the situation—anything, indeed, to justify her in keeping still upon the couch and being lazy, as she called it. Poor little mother! She had not been lazy, nor had the chance of being lazy much in her life. She had not begun to guess why it was she liked it so much now.

CHAPTER II.

I HAVE now to explain how it was that Mr. Aubrey Leigh was so interesting and so melancholy, and thus awoke the friendship and compassion, and secured the ministrations of the Kingsward family. He was in deep mourning, for though he was only eight-and-twenty he was already a widower, and bereaved beside of his only child. Poor young man! He had married with every appearance of happiness and prosperity, but his wife had died at the end of the first year, leaving him with a baby on his inexperienced hands. He was a young man full of feeling, and, contrary to the advice of all his friends, he had shut himself up in his house in the country and dedicated himself to his child. Dedicated himself to a baby two months old!

There was nobody who did not condemn this unnecessary self-sacrifice. He should have gone away; he should have left the child in the hands of its excellent nurse, under the supervision of that charming person who had been such a devoted nurse to dear Mrs. Leigh, and whom the desolate young widower had not the courage to send away from his house. Her presence there was a double reason, people said, why he should have gone away. For though his

sorrow and trouble was so great that nobody for a moment supposed that he had any idea of such a thing, yet the presence of a lady, and of a lady still called by courtesy a young lady, though older than himself, and who could not be treated like a servant in his house, was embarrassing and not very seemly, everybody said. Suggestions were made to her that she should go away, but then she answered that she had nowhere to go to, and that she had promised to dear Amy never to forsake her child. The country ladies about who took an interest in the young man thought it was "just like" dear Amy, who had always been a rather silly young woman, to exact such a promise, but that Miss Lance would be quite justified in not keeping it, seeing the child had plenty of people to look after her—her grandmother within reach and her father dedicating himself to her.

Miss Lance, however, did not see her duty in the same way; indeed, after the poor little child died—and there was no doubt she had been invaluable during its illness, and devoted herself to it as she had done to its mother—she stayed on still at Leigh Court, though now at last poor Aubrey was persuaded to go away. The mind of the county was relieved beyond description when at last he departed on his travels. These good people did not at all want to get up any scandal in their midst. They did not very much blame Miss Lance for declining to give up a comfortable home. They only felt it was dreadfully awkward and that something should be done about it, though nobody knew what to do. He had

left home nearly six months before he appeared at the Baths with that letter to Mrs. Kingsward in his pocket, and the change and the travel had done him good.

A young man of twenty-eight cannot go mourning all the days of his life for a baby of eight months old, and he had already begun to "get over" the death of his wife before the second event occurred. This troublous beginning of his life had left him very sad, with something of the feeling of a victim, far more badly treated than most in the beginning of his career. But this is not like real grief, which holds a man's heart with a grip of steel. And he was in the stage when a man is ready to be consoled when Bee's blue eyes first flashed upon him. The Kingswards had received him in these circumstances with more *abandon* than they would have done in any other. He was so melancholy; his confidences, when he began to make them, were so touching; his waking up to interest and happiness so delightful to see. And thus, before anyone had thoroughly realized it, the deed was done. They knew nothing about Miss Lance—as how should they?—and what could she have had to do with it if they had known?

So there really was nothing but that doubt of Colonel Kingsward's approval to alloy the pleasure of the party, and it was only Mrs. Kingsward who thought of it. Charlie pooh-poohed the idea altogether. "I think I should know my father better than anyone," the young man said, with much scorn of his mother's hesitation. He was very fond and

very proud of his mother, but felt that as a man himself, he probably understood papa better than the ladies could. "Of course he will approve; why shouldn't he approve? Leigh is a very decent fellow, though I don't think all the world of him, as you girls do. Papa, of course, knew exactly what sort of a fellow he was; a little too quiet—not Bee's sort at all. No, you may clamour as you like, but he's not in the least Bee's sort——"

"I'm supposed to prefer a noisy trooper, I believe," said Bee.

"Well, I should have said that was more like it—but mind you, the governor would never have sent us out a man here who was not good enough for anything. Oh, I understand the old boy!"

"Charlie, how dare you?" cried his mother; but the horror was modified by a laugh, for anything more unlike an old boy than Colonel Kingsward it would not have been very easy to conceive.

"Well, mamma, you wouldn't have me call him my honoured father, would you?" the young man said. He was at Oxford, and he thought himself on the whole not only by far the most solid and serious member of the present party, but on the whole rather more experienced in the world than the gentleman whom in the bosom of the family he still condescended to call "papa."

As for little Betty, who up to this time had been Bee's shadow, and who had not yet begun to feel herself *de trop*, she, no more than her sister, was moved by any of these cares. She was wholly oc-

cupied in studying the new thing which had suddenly started into being before her eyes. Betty was of opinion that it was entirely got up for her amusement and instruction. When she and Bee were alone, she never ceased in her interrogatory. "Oh, Bee, when did you first begin to think about him like that? Oh, Bee, how did you first find out that he was thinking about you? Oh, Bee, don't you mind that he was once in love before?" Such were the questions that poured in an incessant stream into Bee's ears. That young lady was equal to them all, and she was not unwilling to let her sister share more or less in the new enlightenment that had come to herself.

"When did I first begin to think of him?" she said. "Oh, Betty, the first minute I saw him coming through the garden with Charlie to speak to mamma! There were all those horrid men about, you remember, in those gaudy uniforms, and their swords and spurs, and so forth—such dreadful bad taste in foreigners always to be in uniform——"

"But, Bee," cried Betty, "why, I've heard you say——"

"Oh, never mind what you've heard me say! I've been silly, I suppose, in my day, like almost everybody. Aubrey says he cannot think how they can live, always done up in those hot, stiff clothes—none of the ease of Englishmen about them."

"Papa says they are such soldier-like men," says little Betty, who had not been converted from the *régime* of the officers, like Bee,

"Oh, well, papa—he is an officer himself, but he never wears his uniform when he can help it, you know."

"Well," said Betty, "you may say what you like—for my part, I do love a nice uniform. I don't want ever again to dance with a man in a black coat. But Bee, you're too bad—you won't say a word, and I want so to know how it all came about. What put it into your head? And what did you say to one another? And was it he that began first—or was it you?"

"You little dreadful thing" said Bee; "how could a girl ever begin? It shows how little you know! Of course he began; but we didn't begin at all," she said, after a pause, "it just came—all in a moment when I wasn't thinking, and neither was he."

"Do you mean to say that he didn't intend to propose to you?" said Betty, growing pale.

"Oh!" said Bee, impatient, "as if proposing was all! Do you think he just came out with it point blank—'Miss Kingsward, will you marry me?'"

"Well," said Betty: "what did he say then if he didn't say that?"

"Oh, you little goose!" said Bee.

"I am sure if he had said 'Oh, you little goose' to me," said Betty, "I should never have spoken a word to him again."

"It is no use talking to little girls," said Bee, with a sigh. "You don't understand; and, to be sure, how could you understand—at your age and all?"

"Age!" said Betty, indignant, "there is but fifteen months between us, and I've always done everything with you. We've always had on new things together, and gone to the same places and everything. It is you that are very unkind now you have got engaged; and I do believe you like this big horrid man better than me."

"Oh, you little goose!" said Bee, again.

"No, it isn't a big but a little, horrid man. I made a mistake," said Betty, "not like Captain Kreutzner that you used to like so much. It's small people you care for now; not your own nice people like me and mamma, but a man that you had never heard the name of when you first came here, and now you quote and praise him, and make the most ridiculous fuss about him, even to Charlie, who is far nicer-looking!—and won't even tell your sister what he says!"

This argument came to so high a tone that mamma called out from her room to know what was amiss. "It does not become you girls to carry on your old scuffles and quarrels," she said, "now that one of you, at least, is so grown up and about to take upon herself the responsibilities of life."

"Is Aubrey a responsibility?" Betty whispered in her sister's ears.

"Oh, you little silly thing!" Bee replied; and presently Mrs. Kingsward's maid came in to say that Mr. Leigh was in the sitting-room, and would Miss Bee go to him as her mistress was not ready; for this was the little fiction that was kept up in those

days before Colonel Kingsward's letter had been received. It will be seen, however, that it was but a fiction, and that as a matter of fact there was very little restraint put on the young people's intercourse. "You must not consider that anything is settled; you must not think there's any engagement," Mrs. Kingsward had said. "Indeed, indeed, I cannot take upon me to sanction anything till I hear from her papa." But virtually they met as much as they liked, and even indulged in little talks apart, and meetings by themselves, before Mrs. Kingsward was ready; so that as a matter of fact this restriction did very little harm.

And in due time Colonel Kingsward's letter was received, and it was not unfavourable. The Colonel said that, on the whole, he should have preferred it had Mr. Leigh waited till they had all returned home. It would have been a seemly forbearance, and saved Mrs. Kingsward a great deal of anxiety; but as matters stood and as his dear wife approved, and he heard nothing but good of Mr. Leigh, he would not withdraw the provisional consent which she seemed to have given. "It will be expedient in the circumstances that you should all return home as soon as possible, that I may go into matters with the young man," the Colonel added in that part of his letter which was not intended to be read to Aubrey Leigh. And he added, as Bee had prophesied, "You might have been sure that I should not introduce a young man to my family, and to yourself, my dear, without ascertaining previously," etc., etc., just as Bee had

said. He added, "Of course I never contemplated anything of this sort: but one can never tell what may happen when young people are thrown together. The property is a good one, and the young man unexceptionable, from all I can hear." Then Mrs. Kingsward's mind was set at ease. It seemed to Bee that her father might have said something on the subject of her happiness, and acknowledged Aubrey to be something more than an unexceptionable young man. It was inconceivable, she thought to herself, how cool people are when they come to that age. The property good, and the young man unexceptionable—was that all? Did papa take no more interest than that? But at all events the engagement was now quite permitted and acknowledged, and they might walk out together all day, and dance together all night, without a word said; for which Bee forgave and instantly forgot—it was really of so little importance—the coolness of papa.

Mrs. Kingsward's "cure" was over, and by this time most people were leaving the Bath. Our party made their preparations for leaving too, in the pleasantest way. It was not to be at all a rapid journey, which would not have been good for Mrs. Kingsward. They were to make their way at leisure from one beautiful old city to another across the breadth of Germany, staying a day here and a day there, travelling for the most part in a large, old-fashioned carriage, such as was the custom then, with a wide-hooded seat in front, like the *banquette* of a French diligence, in which two people could be extremely

happy, seeing the scenery much better than those inside could do, or perhaps not seeing the scenery at all, but occupying each other quite as agreeably with the endless talk of lovers, which is not interesting to anybody but themselves. Before they set out upon this journey, however, which was to hold so great a place in Bee's life, a little incident occurred to her which did not appear to be of very much consequence, but which made some impression on her mind at the time, and vaguely appeared afterwards to throw light on various other events. The German Bath at which the little story of her love took place is surrounded with woods—woods of a kind that are never seen anywhere else, though they are the special feature of German Baths. They are chiefly composed of fir trees, and they are arranged upon the most strictly mathematical principles, with that precision which is dear to the German mind, row upon row standing close together, as if they had been stuck in so at their present height, with so many cubic feet of air to each, as in the London lodging-houses. They are traversed by broad roads, with benches at intervals, and at each corner there is a wooden board on which is painted indications how to find the nearest *restauration* where beer is to be had, and the veal of the country—for the German, in his hours of ease and amusement, has continual occasion to be “restored.”

Bee had gone out early in the morning to make a little sketch of an opening in the trees through which a village spire was visible. There were not

many points for the artist in landscape, especially one of such moderate powers as Bee, and she was very anxious to finish this to present it, I need scarcely say, to Aubrey, as a memento of the place. Probably there was some other sentimental reason—such as that they had first spoken words of special meaning there, or had first exchanged looks that were of importance in their idyll, or some other incident of equal weight. She was seated on one of the benches, with her little colour box and bottle of water, giving the finishing touches to her sketch. Sooth to say, Bee was no great performer, and the ranks of the dark trees standing arithmetically apart to permit of that little glimpse of distance, were too much for her. They looked in her sketch like two dark green precipices rather than like trees, and had come to a very difficult point, when a lady coming along by one of the side walks, round the corner past the *restauration*, suddenly sat down by Bee's side and startled her a little. She was not a girl who was easily frightened, but the suddenness of the apparition out of the silent morning when she had thought nobody was in sight was a little startling and made her hand shake.

"I hope I am not intruding upon you," the lady said.

"Oh, no!" said Bee, looking up with her bright face. She was as fresh as the morning in her broad Leghorn hat with the blue ribbon, and her eyes that danced and sparkled. The stranger by her side was much older than Bee. She was a handsome woman;

dark, with fine eyes, too, a sidelong look in them, and a curious half smile which was like La Gioconda, that famous picture Bee had seen in the Louvre, as we all have. She thought of La Gioconda at once, when she looked up into the lady's face. She was entirely dressed in black, and there could not have been found anywhere a more perfect contrast to Bee.

They got into conversation quite easily, for Bee was a girl who loved to talk. The lady gave her several hints about her little picture which Bee knew enough to know were dictated by superior knowledge, and then they got talking quite naturally about the place and the people who were there. After they had discussed the society and the number of English people at the Bath, and Bee had disclosed the hotel at which she was staying, and many details of her innocent life, which she was not at all conscious of disclosing—the stranger began to inquire about various people. It was not by any means at once that she introduced the name of Leigh; not indeed till she had been over the Reynoldses, and the Gainsboroughs, and the Collinses, under Bee's exultant guidance and fine power of narrative; then she said tentatively, that there was she believed, at one of the hotels, a family of Leighs.

"Oh!" cried Bee, her countenance flushing over with a sudden brilliant delightful blush, which seemed to envelop her from top to toe. She had been looking up into her companion's face so that the stranger got the full benefit of this sudden resplendent change

of colour. She then turned very demurely to her sketch, and said meekly, "I don't know any family, but there is a Mr. Leigh at our hotel."

"Oh," said the lady, but in a very different tone from Bee's startled "oh!" She said it coldly, as if recording a fact. "I thought," she said, "it was the Leighs of Hurstleigh, friends of mine. I may have been deceived by seeing the name in the lists."

"But I think, indeed I am sure, that Mr. Aubrey Leigh is connected with the Leighs of Hurstleigh," Bee said.

"Oh, a young man, a widower, an inconsolable; I think I remember hearing of him. Is that the man?"

"I don't know if he is an inconsolable," cried Bee, with a quick movement of anger and then she thought how foolish that was, for of course a stranger like this could have no unkind meaning. She added with great gravity, "It is quite true that he has been married before."

Poor little Bee, she was not at all aware how she was betraying herself. She was more vexed and indignant than words can say, when the woman (who after all could not be a lady) burst into a laugh. "Oh! I think I can see how matters stand with Aubrey Leigh," this impertinent intruder cried.

CHAPTER III.

It was just two days after the interview in the wood described above, that the Kingsward party got under weigh for home, accompanied, I need not say, by Aubrey Leigh. Bee had not told him of that chance meeting, restrained I do not know by what indefinite feeling that he would not care to hear of it, and also by the sensation that she had as good as told the lady, who was so disagreeable and impertinent as to laugh, what change had taken place in Aubrey's sentiments, and what she had herself to do with that change. It was so silly, oh, so silly of her, and yet she had said nothing, or next to nothing. And there was no reason why she should not have said whatever she pleased, now that the engagement was fully acknowledged and known; indeed, if that woman were in any society at all, she must have heard of it, seeing that, as Bee was aware, not without pleasure, it had afforded a very agreeable diversion to the floating community, a pleasant episode in the tittle-tattle of the gardens and the wells. Bee had no absurd objection to being talked of. She knew that in her condition of life, which was so entirely satisfactory as a condition, everything that concerned a family was talked over

and universally known. It was a thing inevitable to a certain position, and a due homage of society to its members. But somehow she did not mention it to Aubrey, nor, indeed, to anyone, which was a very unusual amount of reticence. She did not even give him the sketch, though it was finished. She had been quite grateful for that person's hints at the time, and eagerly had taken advantage of them to improve her drawing; but it seemed to her, when she looked at it now, that it was not her own at all, that the other hand was so visible in it that it would be almost dishonest to call it hers. This, of course, was wholly fantastic, for even supposing that person to have given valuable hints, she had never touched the sketch, and Bee alone had carried them out. But, anyhow, her heart sickened at it, and she thrust it away at the very bottom of the box that Moulsey was packing. She had no desire to see the horrid thing again.

In a day or two, however, Bee had altogether forgotten that interview in the wood. She had so many things to occupy her mind. There were few railways in those days, and the party had a long way to travel before they came to Cologne, where that method of travelling began. They all felt that common life would re-commence there and their delightful wandering would be over. In the meantime, there was a long interval of pleasure before them. The early breakfast at the hotel in the first hours of the autumnal morning, the fun of packing everyone away in the big coach, the books to be brought out

to fill up corners, both of time and space, and "Murray" then alone in his glory, with no competitive American, no Baedeker, no Joanne, to share his reign—spread out open at the right place, so that mamma inside should be able to lay her finger at once upon any village or castle that struck her—and above all the contrivances to be carried out for securing the *banquette*, as Bee said, for "ourselves," made a lively beginning. Charlie and Betty sometimes managed to secure this favourite place if the attention of the others flagged for a moment, and though mamma generally interposed with a nod or a whisper to restore it to the privileged pair, sometimes she was mischievous too, and consented to their deprivation, and desired them for once to keep her company inside. She generally, however, repented of this before the day was over, and begged that their favourite seat might be restored to them.

"For they are really no fun at all," the poor lady said. "I might as well have two images from Madame Tussaud's."

It had been a little hard upon Aubrey at the moment of their departure to find half the garrison round the carriage, and bouquets enough to fill a separate vehicle thrust into every corner, the homage of those warriors to the gracious ladies. He had been very cross, and had made a great exhibition of himself, especially when Captain Kreutzner's faggot of forget-me-nots, tied with a ribbon like that on Bee's hat, had been presented with indescribable looks. What did the fellow mean by bringing forget-

me-nots? He wanted to pitch it out of the window as soon as they were fairly started.

"What an idiotic custom!" he cried. "What do the fools think you want with such loads of flowers when you are starting on a journey?"

"Why, it is just then you do want them," cried Betty, who had a dozen or so to her own share, "to smell sweet and show us how much our friends think of us."

"They will not smell sweet very long, and then what will your friends think of you?" said the angry lover.

Was it possible that Bee was detaching a little knot of the blue flowers to put in her waistband? Bee, Bee! his own property, who had no right so much as to look at another man's flowers! And what did she do, seeing the cloud upon his face, but arrange another little bouquet, which, with her sweetest smile—the little coquette—she endeavoured to put into his, Aubrey's, button-hole! He snatched them out of her hand in a sort of fury. "Do you want me never to forget that heavy brute of a German?" he cried, in his indignation. "You may put him near your heart, but I should like to kick him!" These very natural sentiments made Bee laugh—which was cruel; but then poor Captain Kreutzner had been blotted out of her life some time ago, and knew his fate, and had really no right whatever to present her with these particular flowers. His lovely bouquet with its blue ribbon was given to a girl in the first village, and awakened

the still more furious jealousy of another swain who was less easily appeased than Aubrey; but this *ricochet* was not thought of by the first and principal pair.

There was not perhaps so many remarkable features in that journey as if it had been through Italy. There were great plains to traverse, where the chief sights were cottages and farmhouses, women going by with great loads of freshly cut grass full of flowers on their heads, fodder for the homedwelling cows—or men carrying their hops clinging to the pole, to be picked at home, or long straggling branches of the tobacco plant; and in the evening the postillion would whip up his horses, and Charlie in the *banquette*, or John, the manservant, in the rumble, would tootle upon a horn which the former had acquired clandestinely before the party set out—as they dashed through a village or little town with lighted windows, affording them many a flying peep of the domestic life of those tranquil places. And in the middle of the day they stopped to rest somewhere, where the invariable veal was to be found at some Guest-house a little better than the ordinary, where perhaps a bigger village stood with all its high peaked stream: and at night rattled into an old walled town with shadowy high houses which belonged to the fourteenth century, and had not changed a whit since that time. There they stayed a day or two, varying the confinement of the coach by a course through everything that was to be seen, setting out in a party through the roughly-paved

streets, but parting company before long, so that Aubrey and Bee would find themselves alone in the shelter of a church or in an insignificant corner by the walls, while the others pursued their sight-seeing conscientiously.

"As for me, what I like is the general aspect," said Bee, with an air of superiority. "I don't care to poke into every corner, and Aubrey knows the history, which is the chief thing."

"Are they talking all the time of the history?" said Betty, overawed.

But this, perhaps, was not the opinion of Charlie and mamma. No, they did not care very much for the history. People are bad travellers in that stage of life. They are too much interested in their own history. They went about like a pair of Philistines through all these ancient streets, talking of nothing but the things of to-day. The most serious part of their talk was about the home in the depths of England in which they were henceforth to spend their lives. Aubrey had ideas about re-furnishing—about making everything new. It would be impossible to tell the reader how bad was the taste of the time, and with what terrible articles of furniture he proposed to replace the spindle legs and marquetry of his grandfathers. But then these things were the fashion, and supposed to be the best things of the time. To hear them talking of sofas and curtains, and of the colour for the boudoir and the hangings of the drawing-room in the midst of all those graceful old places, was inconceivable.

You would have said the stupidest, unimpressionable pair, talking of ugly modern English furniture, when they should have been noting the old world of Nuremberg—the unchanging mediæval city. But you must remember that the furniture was only a symbol of their love and their new life, and all the blessedness of being together, and the endless delights of every day. The sofas and the curtains meant the *Vita Nuova*, and the refurnishing of the old house a beautiful fabric of all the honour and the joy of life.

Then came the great river, and the progress down its shining stream, and between those beautiful banks, where again they made several pauses to enjoy the scenery. The Rhine is not now the river it was then. It was still the great river of romance in those days—Byron had been there, and the young people remembered Roland and his tower, with his love in the white convent opposite, and felt a shudder at the thought of the Lorelei as they floated under the high and gloomy bank. I doubt, however, whether the lovers thought much even of these things. They were busy just now about the gardens, which Bee was fully minded to remodel and fill with everything that was new and delightful in the way of flowers.

“I shall have masses of colour about the terrace, and every spot covered. I wonder which you like best, majolica vases or rustic baskets?” Bee was saying, when her mother called her to point out the Pfalz and Bishop Hatto’s tower.

"Oh, yes, mamma, it's very pretty. But you like clematis, Aubrey, for the balustrade—to wind in and out of the pillars. Yes, yes, I can see it well enough. I like every kind of clematis, even the common one, the traveller's joy—and it would hang down, you know, over that old bit of wall you told me of. Do go forward, Aubrey, and let them see you are taking an interest. I do see it all quite well, and it is very romantic, and we are quite enjoying it I can assure you, mamma."

This was how they made their way down stream; in the moonlight nights they ceased to talk of practical matters, and went back to the history of their loves.

"Do you remember, Bee, that first time in the wood——"

"Oh, Aubrey, don't you recollect that drive coming back in the dark—before I knew——?"

"But you always did know from the very beginning, Bee?"

"Well, perhaps I suspected—and used to think——"

"You darling, what did you think?—and did you really care—as early as that?"

They went on like this whatever happened outside, giving a careless glance at the heights, at the towers, at the robbers' castle above and the little villages below; not so much as looking at them, and yet remembering them ever after, enclosing the flow of their young lives, as it were, in that strong flowing of the Rhine, noting nothing and yet seeing

everything with the double sight which people possess at the highest moment and crisis of their career. They came at length to Cologne, where this enchanted voyage was more or less to end. To be sure, they were still to be together; but only in the railway, with all the others round them, hearing more or less what they said. They said good-bye to the Rhine with a little sentiment, a delightful little sadness full of pleasure.

"Shall we ever be so happy again?" said Bee, with a sigh.

"Oh, yes, my sweet, a hundred times, and happier, and happier," said the young man; and thus they were assured it was to be.

I don't think any of them ever forgot that arrival at Cologne. They came into sight of the town just in the evening, when the last glow of sunset was still burning upon the great river, but lights beginning to show in the windows, and glimmering reflected in the water. The Cathedral was not completed then, and a crane, like some strange weird animal stood out against the sky upon the top of the tower. The hotel to which they were going had a covered terrace upon the river with lights gleaming through the green leaves. They decided they would have their table there, and dine with all that darkling panorama before their eyes through the veil of the foliage, the glowing water, the boats moving and passing, with now and then a raft coming down from the upper stream, and the bridge of boats opening to give passage to a fuming fretting

steamboat. Aubrey and Bee went hand in hand up the steps; nobody noticed in the half dark how close they were together. They parted with a close pressure of warm hands.

"Don't be long, darling," he said, as they parted, only for a moment, only to prepare a little for the evening, to slip into a fresh dress, to take out a new ribbon, to make one's youthful self as fair as such unnecessary adjuncts permitted.

But what did Aubrey care for a new ribbon? The only blue he thought of was that in Bee's eyes.

I do not think she was more than ten minutes over these little changes. She dressed like a flash of lightning, Betty said, who could not find her own things half so quickly, Moulsey being occupied with mamma. Such a short moment not worth counting, and yet enough, more than enough, to change a whole life!

Bee ran down as light as air to the sitting-room which had been engaged for the party. She felt sure that Aubrey would hurry, too, so as to have a word before dinner, before the rest were ready—as if the whole day had not been one long word, running through everything. She came lightly to the door of the room in her fresh frock and her blue ribbons, walking on air, knowing no shadow of any obstacle before her or cloud upon the joyful triumphant sky. She did not even hear the sound of the subdued voices, the faint little sob, strangest of all sounds at such a moment, which seemed to come out to meet her as she opened the door. Bee opened it

wondering only if Aubrey were there, thinking of some jibe to address to him about the length of time men took to their toilettes, if she happened to be ready first.

She was very much startled by what she saw. Her mother, still in her travelling dress, sat by the table with a letter open in her hands. She had not made any preparation for dinner—she, usually so dainty, so anxious to get rid of the cloaks and of the soils of the journey. She had taken off her hat, which lay on the table, but was still enveloped in the shawl which she had put on to keep off the evening chills. As for Aubrey, he was exactly as he had been when they parted with him, except that all the light had gone out of his face. He was very pale, and he, too, had a letter in his hand. He uttered a stifled exclamation when he saw Bee at the door, and, lifting his arms as though in protest against something intolerable, walked away to the other end of the room.

“Oh, Bee,” said Mrs. Kingsward, “Oh, go away, my dear, go away! I mean—get something to eat, you and Charlie, and Betty, and then get to bed. Get to bed! I am too tired to take anything, and I am going upstairs at once.”

“I thought you had been upstairs, mamma, half-an-hour ago. What is the matter? You look like a ghost, and so does Aubrey. Has anything happened? Mamma, you won’t look at me, and Aubrey turns his back. What have I done? Is it anything about me?”

"What nonsense, child!" said Mrs. Kingsward, with a pretence at a smile. "What could you have to do with it? We have both—Mr. Leigh and myself—found letters, and we are busy reading them. I am sure the dinner must be served. We ordered it in the balcony, don't you remember? Run away and make Charlie and Betty sit down at once. I am too tired. Moulsey will run down in a little and get something for me."

"Mamma," said Bee, "you cannot make up a story. Something has happened, I am sure of it; and it is something about me."

"Nonsense, child! Go away and have your dinner. I would come if I could. Don't you see what a budget of letters I have got? And some of them I must answer to-night."

"Have you letters, too, Aubrey?" said Bee, in her amazement, standing still as she had paused, arrested by the sight of them, just within the door.

"Bee, I must beg you will not put any questions; go and do what I tell you; your brother and sister will be coming downstairs. Yes, of course, you can see that Mr. Leigh has his letters to read as well as I."

"Mr. Leigh! I wonder if we have all gone mad, or what is the matter?" Aubrey! tell me—you, at least, if mamma won't. You must have had a quarrel. Mamma, why do you call him Mr. Leigh?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, Bee, go away."

"I am not going away," cried the girl. "You have had a quarrel about something. Come, mamma,

you must not quarrel with Aubrey—if he has done something wrong or said something silly, I will answer for him, he never intended it. Aubrey, what do you mean, sir, turning your back both on mamma and me? Come here, quick, and ask her pardon, and say you will never do it again.”

Poor little Bee's heart was fluttering, but she would not allow herself to believe there was anything really wrong. She went close up to her mother and stood by her, with a hand upon her shoulder. “Aubrey!” she said, “never mind if you are wrong or not, come and beg mamma's pardon, and she will forgive you. There must not—there must not—oh, it is too ridiculous!—be anything wrong between mamma and you. Aubrey!”

He turned round slowly and faced them both with a face so pale that Bee stopped short with a gasp, and could not say a word more. Mrs. Kingsward had buried her face in her hands. Bee looked from one to the other with a dismay which she could not explain to herself. “Oh, what is the matter? What is the matter?” she said.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was no merry dinner that night in the verandah of the hotel under the clinging wreaths of green. Mrs. Kingsward went up to her room still with her heavy shawl about her shoulders which she had forgotten, though it added something to her discomfort—followed by Bee, pale and rigid, offering no help, following her mother like an angry shadow. Charlie and Betty met them on the stairs and stood aside in consternation, unable to conceive what had happened. Mrs. Kingsward gave them a sort of troubled smile and said: "Get your dinner, dears; don't wait for us. I am too tired to come down to-night."

"But, mamma——" they both began in remonstrance.

"Go down and get your dinner," said Mrs. Kingsward, peremptorily.

As for Bee, she did not look at them at all. Her eyes were fierce with some sentiment which Betty could not divine, and angry, blazing, as if they might have set light to the hotel.

Little Betty pressed against Charlie's side as they went down, startled and alarmed. "Bee has had a quarrel with mamma," she whispered, in tones of awe.

"That's impossible," said Charlie.

"Oh, no, it's not impossible. There was once——"

It comforted them both a little in the awful circumstances that such a thing had perhaps happened before. They went very silently and much cast down to that table in the verandah, whither obsequious waiters beckoned them, and contemplated with dismay all the plates laid, all the glitter of the lamps and the glasses.

"I suppose we must not wait for them as they said so," said Charlie, sitting down in his place at the bottom of the table. "Tell Mr. Leigh—that is the other gentleman—that we are ready."

"The other gentleman, sir," said the waiter, who was the pride of the establishment for his English, "has gone out."

"Gone out!" said Charlie. He could only stare at Betty and she at him, not knowing what to think.

"He has had his letters, too, sir," said the waiter in a significant tone.

His letters! What could that have to do with it? Charlie also had had his letters, one of them a bill which he did not view with any satisfaction; but even at twenty-one a man already learns to disguise his feelings, and sits down to dinner cheerfully though he has received a bill by the post. Charlie's mind at first could not perceive any connection between Bee's withdrawal upstairs and Aubrey's disappearance. It was Betty who suggested, sitting down very close

to him, that it looked as if Aubrey and Bee had quarrelled too.

"Perhaps that is what it is," she said, as if she had found out a satisfactory reason. "Lovers always quarrel; and mamma will have taken Aubrey's part, and Bee will be so angry, and feel as if she could never forgive him. There, that is what it must be."

"A man may quarrel with his sweetheart," said Charlie, severely, "but he needn't spoil other people's dinner for that;" however, they comforted themselves that this was the most likely explanation, and that all would come right in the morning. And they were very young and hungry, having eaten nothing since the veal at one o'clock. And these two made on the whole a very satisfactory meal.

The scene upstairs was very different. Mrs. Kingsward sent Moulsey away on pretence of getting her some tea, and then turned to her daughter who stood by the dressing-table and stared blankly, without seeing anything, into those mysterious depths of the glass which are so suggestive to people in trouble. She said, faintly, "Bee, I would so much rather you would not ask me any more questions to-night."

"That is," said Bee, "you would like to send me away to be miserable by myself without even knowing what it is, while you will take your sleeping draught and forget it. How can you be so selfish, mamma? And you have made my Aubrey join in the conspiracy against me—my Aubrey who belongs to me as papa does to you. If you are against us it is all very well, though I can't imagine why you

should be against us—but at least you need not interfere between Aubrey and me.”

“Oh, my dear child, my poor darling!” said Mrs. Kingsward, wringing her hands.

“It is all very well to call me your poor child, when it is you that are making me poor,” said Bee.

She kept moving a little, first on one foot then on the other, but always gazing into the glass which presented the image of an excited girl, very pale, but lit up with a sort of blaze of indignation, and unable to keep still. It was not that girl’s face, however, that Bee was gazing at, but at the dim world of space beyond in which there were faint far-away reflections of the light and the world. “And if you think you will get rid of me like this, and hang me up till to-morrow without knowing what it is, you are mistaken, mamma. I will not leave you until you have told me. What is it? What has papa got in his head? What does he say in that horrid—horrid letter? I wish I had known when I gave it to you. I should have thrown it into the river instead of ever letting it come into your hands.”

“Bee, you must know that this passion is very wrong and very improper. You ought not to face me like that, and demand an answer. I am your mother,” said Mrs. Kingsward, but with a falter which was all unlike that assumption of authority, “and I have no need to tell you anything more than I think is for your good.”

“Ah! I know where that comes from,” cried Bee; “that’s papa’s thunder! that’s what he has told

you to say! You don't believe, yourself, that you have a right to hang up a poor girl over some dreadful, dreadful abyss, when she was so happy and never suspected anything." Here Bee's voice faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered herself. "And to drag her away from the one person that could support her, and to cut the ground from under her feet, and never to tell her what it means!"

It was at this point that Moulsey, with a little discreet cough to herald her approach, came into the room, bearing a tray with tea, and a little cover from which came a faint but agreeable odour. Mrs. Kingsward was in great trouble about her child, but she was much exhausted and in want of physical support, and it did seem to her hard that she might not be permitted to eat the smallest of cutlets before embarking on a scene such as she knew this would be. Oh, why didn't papa come and say it himself, when there was so much that was dreadful to say?

"Shall I fetch something for Miss Bee, too?" said Moulsey. "It ain't a good thing for a young creature to go without her dinner. If she's not going down, ma'am, as would be much the best, I'll just run and fetch a little something for Miss Bee too."

"Indeed, indeed, Bee, Moulsey is right. Think how miserable the others will feel all alone, and thinking something has happened. Do go down, darling, and strengthen yourself with a little food, and take a glass of wine just for once to please me. And after that you shall be told everything—all that I know."

Bee grew paler and paler, standing there before the glass, and her eyes blazed more and more. "It is as bad as that, then!" she said under her breath to herself, and then went away from where she was standing to the further end of the room. "I shall wait here, mamma, till you have had your tea. I know you want it. Oh, go away, Moulsey! Let me alone! No, you shall not bring me anything! or, if you do, I will throw it out of the window," she said, stamping her foot. The dark end of the room seemed suddenly lighted up by a sort of aurora borealis, with the fire of poor Bee's burning eyes and the flashes here and there of her white frock—oh, poor white frock! put on in the sunshine of life and happiness to please her love, and now turned into a sort of sacrificial robe.

"Take it away, Moulsey; I can't eat anything—I can't, indeed—no more than Miss Bee—"

"But you must, ma'am," said Moulsey. "Miss Bee's young; she's had nothing to drain away her strength. But it's far different with you, after all your family and so weak as you are. If Miss Bee were a real good girl, as I always thought her, she'd go away and get something herself just for her poor mamma's sake, and leave you alone for a moment to get a little peace and rest."

"There is no rest for me," murmured the poor lady. "Oh, papa, papa, why didn't you come and tell them yourself?"

These piteous tones went to Bee's heart. They moved her half with contempt, half with compassion

—with something of that high indignant toleration of weakness which is one kind of pity. If mamma could eat and drink at such a moment, why shouldn't she be left to do it? The girl started up and left the room in the quick flashing impulse of her passion. She walked up and down in the corridor outside, her arms folded over her high-beating, tumultuous heart. Yes, no doubt she was going to be miserable, all her happiness was cut down and withered away, but in her present passionate impulse of resistance and gathering of all her forces to resist the catastrophe, which she did not understand, it could scarcely be said that she was wretched yet. What was it—what was it? she was saying to herself. It might still be something that would pass away, which would be overcome by the determined, impassioned stand against it, which Bee felt that it was in her to make. The thing that was worst of all, that stole away her courage, was that Aubrey had failed her. He should have been there by her side whatever happened. He ought not to have abandoned her. No doubt he thought it was more delicate, more honourable, more something or other; and that it was his duty to leave her to brave it alone. It must have been one of those high-flown notions of honour that men have. Honour! to leave a girl to fight for herself and him, alone—but, no doubt, that was what had seemed right in his eyes. Bee walked up and down in the half-lighted passage, sometimes almost pushing against someone going up or down, waiters or chambermaids or surprised guests, who looked after her when she

had passed; but she did not take any notice of them, and she heard as she passed her mother's door little sounds of tea-cups and dishes, and Moulsey's voice saying "A little more," and her mother's faint replies. Poor mamma! After all, whatever it was, it could not be her affair as it was Bee's. She would be unhappy about it, but not all unhappy. She had the others, who were all right. She had papa. It would not shatter her to pieces even if one of the children was to be shipwrecked. It was the shipwrecked one only who would be broken to pieces. For the first time in her life Bee felt the poignant sensation, the jealous pride, the high, desolate satisfaction of suffering. The others could all eat and do the ordinary things. She was elevated over all that, silent as on a Peak in Darien. She felt almost a kind of dreadful pleasure in the situation, smiling to herself at the sounds of her mother's little meal. She could dine while Bee was miserable. They could all dine—Charlie (which was natural), Betty, even Aubrey. She had no doubt that he, too, must be seated, feeling as a man does that dinner must go on whatever happens, at the table downstairs.

After a while, which seemed a long time to Bee, Moulsey came out with the tray. She was startled, and exclaimed under her breath at the appearance of the girl walking up and down in the corridor: "I did think you would have had the sense to go and join the others, Miss Bee." Bee was too much uplifted, too distant on her high pinnacle of martyrdom, to make any reply, but when Moulsey ventured to

add a word of advice, to the effect that she must be careful of her mamma and not weary her with questions and she so tired and so weak, the girl flashed forth all her heart of indignation. "She has eaten her cutlet, it appears," cried Bee. "I should think she may answer my questions."

"Oh!" cried the maid, who had the privileges of an old servant, "you have got a heart without pity. You are just like your papa!"

Bee swept past her into the room, where poor Mrs. Kingsward, who after all had eaten but a morsel, sat lying back in an easy chair awaiting the dreadful conflict which she knew was coming. Poor lady, she had lost all her brightness, that pretty grace of the young mother among her grown up children, which prompted so many compliments. She lay back in her easy chair, feeling as she said "any age"—as old as any woman on the edge of the grave, not knowing how she was to bear the onslaught that was coming, and how she was to say what had to be said. He had borne it far better than Bee—poor Aubrey, poor Aubrey! whom she must not call Aubrey any more. He had not denied anything, he had fallen as it were at her feet, like a house that had been undermined and had no sound foundations, but Bee was different. Bee was a tower that had foundations—a girl that was able to stand up even to papa, and why—why had he not come to give forth his sentence in his own way?

Bee came forward flashing into the light, in that white frock which shone, and with those eyes that

blazed through all the neutral tints in the room. She did not sit down, which would have been a little relief, but seized a chair and stood with her hand upon the back, leaning upon it.

"I hope, mamma," she said, pitiless, "that you liked your tea, and ate something—and that you are better now."

"Oh, Bee!" cried the poor lady; if there is one reproach more dreadful than another it is this of being able to eat when you ought to be overwhelmed with trouble. Mrs. Kingsward could scarcely keep from crying at the imputation. And Bee, I fear, knew that it was the unkindest thing that could be said.

"Now, mamma," she resumed, almost stonily, "it is time that you should tell me what has happened. We arrived here all quite happy—it is just an hour ago——" here Bee's voice shook a little, but she commanded it with an effort—"I ran up to dress for dinner, and when I came back in about ten minutes I found you and Aubrey—with your letters—looking as if you had both been dead and buried while I was away. You wouldn't answer me, and he never said a word. You had done something to him in that little time to make him turn away from me, and yet you will not tell me what it is. Here I am alone," said Bee, once more with a quiver in her voice. "Aubrey ought to be standing by me. I suppose he is having his dinner downstairs, too, and thinking no more of me. I just stand alone, nobody caring in all the world. What is the meaning of it, mamma?"

"Bee, you are very hard upon me. And poor Aubrey, he is having no dinner—of that I am sure."

"You called him Mr. Leigh downstairs."

"So I did, and so I must, and all of us; but I cannot have you speaking of him like that, poor, poor fellow; and just for this once—— Oh, Bee, my darling, don't stand and look at me so! I would rather have died than say it either to him or to you. Your papa has been hearing I don't know what, and he has changed his mind about Mr. Leigh altogether, and says it must not be."

"What must not be?"

"Oh, Bee! Oh, don't take it so hard! Don't look like that! Your — your — engagement, my darling. Have patience; oh, have patience! He has heard something. Men hear things that we would never hear. And he doesn't deny it. Oh! he doesn't deny it. I had a hope that he would contradict it at once, and flare up in a rage like you, and say it wasn't true. But he doesn't deny it—poor boy, poor boy! And after that, how can I say one word to papa?"

"My engagement?" said Bee, in a hoarse voice. She had been staring at her mother as in a dream—only partially hearing, not understanding at all the rest that was said. "My engagement? He gave his consent. It was all settled. You would not allow us till the letter came, but then it was consent."

"Yes, yes, dear. That was at first. He consented at first because—and now it appears he has heard something—someone has called upon him—he has

discovered—and he writes to me that it must be broken off. Oh, Bee, don't think my heart doesn't bleed for you. I think it will kill me. He says it must be broken off at once."

"Who says so?" said Bee, in her passion. "He! One would think you were speaking of God—that can say 'Yes' to-day and 'No' to-morrow, and build things up and then snatch them down. But I will not have it! I am not a doll, to be put in one position and then in another, as anybody pleases. My engagement! It is mine; it is not his."

"Bee, think; it is papa you are speaking of. Dear, I feel for you—I feel for you! but so does he. Oh, my darling, you don't know what you are saying. Do you think he would do anything to make you unhappy if he could help it—your papa, Bee, who has been so good to you all your life?"

"I do not care how good he has been. He is not good now. How will it harm him? He sits at home, and he thinks he can do as he pleases. But not with me. It is my affair more than it is his. He thinks he can break his word and it doesn't matter—but I have given my word, and it does matter. Break my engagement!" cried Bee, her young bosom swelling, the sob rising in her throat that would soon choke her voice. "It is mine and not his; and nobody in the world shall break it. You can tell him so, mamma, or I will write myself and tell him so. I am not a wax image to take any shape he pleases. Who is he? He is not God——"

"Bee—he is your father——"

"Oh, my father! Yes, I do whatever he tells me. If he says I am to fetch anything I run like a little dog. I have never been disobedient. But this—this is different. I am not a child any longer. And, mamma, not for him nor for anyone—not even for you will I take back my word."

"Bee! You make me say a great deal more than I meant to say. I thought you would have been a good child and seen that papa must know best. My poor, poor little girl, there is worse behind. Mr. Leigh, whom we all thought so much of——"

"Aubrey," Bee managed to say, though for no other word could she command her voice.

"Darling, he has deceived us. He is not what he seems. He has done, oh, so wrong—there have been things—that you ought never to hear——"

"Stop!" said Bee. She had to speak in monosyllables with her labouring breath. "Wait!—not behind his back." She rushed to the bell and rung it so wildly that both waiter and chambermaid appeared in alarm, with Moulsey rushing in calling for a doctor, and saying that her lady was going to faint. Bee pushed the woman aside and turned to the waiter, who stood anxious at the door. "Mr. Leigh!" she cried, impatiently; "the gentleman—who was with us: tell him—to come here."

"The tall young gentleman?" said the waiter.

"No—the other: tell him he is to come here—instantly—this moment."

"I beg your pardon, miss," said the man. "The

other gentleman? He have been gone away this half-hour."

"Gone away!" she cried. And it seemed to Bee that the blackness of darkness closed over her and the room and everything in it. She did not faint, oh no, no such happiness—but everything grew dark, and through the dark she heard her own voice speaking—speaking, and did not know what she said.

CHAPTER V.

BUT Aubrey had not gone away. He had gone out in the dizziness of a great downfall, scarcely knowing how to keep his feet steady as he wandered along the dark street, not knowing where he went. The landscape that had charmed them all so much—was it scarcely an hour ago?—the lamps reflected in the water; the verandah, with its wreaths of green; the brilliant yet mysterious glimmer of the moon, made his heart sink to look at them now. He strayed off into the darkest of the narrow streets, into the great gloom of the cathedral shadow, where he could see nothing but a poor light twinkling here and there, making the darkness visible. Oh! how certain it is that, however sweet they may seem, your sins will find you out! Oh! how more than certain if you have let yourself be dragged down once, only once, in a spotless life, that the one fault will be made into the central fact of your whole existence. If he had been a bad, dissipated man, it

would have been only fair. But this poor young fellow was like the young man whom our Lord loved though he went away. All good things he had kept from his youth up—but once, only once, half distracted by grief, and by the desire which is so natural to escape from grief, and by infernal temptation, he had fallen—oh, there was no need to tell him how he had fallen! Had it not been the canker in his soul ever since? And now this one thing, this miserable, much-repented fault, which revolted, disgusted, horrified himself, was brought up against him as if it were the pattern upon which he had shaped his life.

And now, what was left for him but to fall down, down into the unfathomable abyss? The distracted feelings with which he had broken away from home, the horror and dismay that at once belonged to his natural grief and made the burden of it a thousand times harder to bear, all rushed back upon him, whirling him down and down to dimmer and more awful depths. He had partially healed himself in the intolerableness of his trouble by travel and change, and the arbitrary forgetfulness which comes from absence and the want of any association which could call back to him what was past; and then the touch of Bee's soft, girlish hand, the sound of her voice, had suddenly called him back into an enchanted land where everything had again become possible. He had hesitated for some time, wondering if he might dare—he who had a secret smirch upon him which nobody suspected—to avail himself of

this way of salvation. The reader will think that he had not hesitated very long—poor Aubrey—seeing that the introduction, the acquaintance, the love, the engagement had all occurred within the small space of one month; but to the brooding spirit the hours of one interminable day are long enough for a chronicle. Something like the phenomena of love at first sight had occurred in the bleeding yet young heart, which had felt itself cut loose from all the best associations of life. Deliverance, recreation, the new beginning of life and all its possibilities had gleamed upon him in Bee's blue eyes. Her appearance swept away everything that was dark and ominous in his life. Did he dare to ask for her hand, to set out again to make himself a new career? He had worked at that question almost from the first day, discussing it with himself for the three weeks preceding their engagement, waking and sleeping, almost without intermission; and then in a moment he had forgotten all controversy, and let forth without intention the words that had been lying, so to speak, on the threshold of his lips—and in that moment all the clouds had been swept away. He was only eight and twenty after all—so young to have such a past behind him, and what so natural as that his life should begin again—begin now as for the first time? He had hesitated in the first fervour of his betrothal whether he should not tell all his story. But there was no one to tell it to but Mrs. Kingsward—a lady, even a young lady, not looking much older than Bee herself. That is one of the

drawbacks of a young mother. She was still in the sphere of the girls, not in that of the old ladies whom Heaven has ordained to represent the mothers of the race. How could he tell to her the story of that entanglement? If Colonel Kingsward had been there, Aubrey was of opinion that he would have made a clean breast of everything to him. But I think it very likely that he might not have done so. He would have intended it, and he would have put it off from day to day; and then he knew how lightly men of the world look upon such matters. What would have horrified Mrs. Kingsward would probably call forth nothing but a pooh-pooh from her husband. Aubrey, as it proved, was mistaken there, for Colonel Kingsward had ideas of his own, not always corresponding to those of the ordinary man of the world; but no doubt had he heard the story from that side and not from the other, he would have regarded it in a very different light.

But it was too late—too late for these reflections now. The fiat had gone forth, the sentence had been pronounced beyond appeal. Oh, Bee, Bee, she was too good for him; too fresh, too bright, unsullied by the world, for a man who had gone through so much already although he was still young enough. He who had loved and married—though, oh, how differently!—poor little Amy, who was nobody, whom he had liked for her yielding sweetness, sweetness which had cost him so dear—he who had been a father, who had lost his way in life amid the fogs of death and grief—how had he now dared to think

that such a girl as Bee should dedicate her fresh young life to restore him again to the lost possibilities of his? It seemed to him the greatest presumption, the most dreadful, cynical, almost blasphemous attempt. It was the way of the world—to think that any woman, however good, might be sacrificed to the necessities of a man's restoration whatever he had done; everybody thought so, his own mother even. But he, Aubrey, should have known better—he should have known that even at his best he could never have been good enough for Bee, and to think that he had dared now when he was no longer at his best! What a fool, what a fool he had been! He had come to be able to endure the daylight and “get on” well enough when he had arrived at the Bath and seen her first. Why had he not contented himself with that, knowing that he had no right to expect more? And now there was nothing—nothing before him but a plunge into the unutterable darkness—darker than ever, without any hope—worse almost, if worse were possible, than when he had fled from his home.

He did not know how long he had been roaming about the dark town pondering all these dreadful thoughts. When he went back to the hotel, which he finally did, worn out, not knowing where else to go, one reproachful waiter, with eyes that said he ought to have been in bed long ago, was waiting for him with a curt demand what he would have to eat, and all the house, except that deserted eating-room, where one light twinkled—reproachful, like the waiter—was shut up. He went to his room when he

had swallowed some brandy, which was the only thing he could find to put a little warmth into his chilled limbs and despairing heart, and threw himself miserable upon his bed, where I have no doubt he slept, though he was not aware of it—as Bee did, though she had no intention of doing so.

The only one who was really a sufferer in this respect was poor Mrs. Kingsward, who was ill, and who had been far more agitated than her feeble strength could bear. She it was who lay and wondered all through the night what she must do. Was he really gone without a word, thus proving how much he was in the wrong, and how right the Colonel was? It would have saved her from a great deal of embarrassment, but I do not think Mrs. Kingsward wished that Aubrey might have really gone. It was too summary, it was not natural, it would show Colonel Kingsward to have been too right. Oh! she believed he was right! She did not doubt that his decision was for the best any more than she doubted that it was inexorable: but still the heart revolted a little, and she hoped that he might not be proved so unutterably right as that. And poor Bee—poor little Bee! She did not know, poor child, that there were bitters in the sweetest cup—that if she had twenty years of Aubrey she would not probably have thought quite so much of him as now—that nobody was perfect, which was a conviction that had been forced upon Mrs. Kingsward's own mind, though it was not a strong one, by the passage of the years. And then the poor

lady went off into perplexed considerations of what she personally must do. Must he leave them all at once, travel home in a different carriage, avoid them at the stations, not venture to come near their table when they dined on the way? It would seem so ridiculous, and it would be so embarrassing after their very close intercourse. But men never thought of these little things. She felt sure that the Colonel would expect her never to let the two meet again. And how could she do that when they were both travelling the same way? Besides, was it fair, was it just, would Bee endure it—never to see him again?

Bee woke up in all the energy of despair. It burst upon her in the first moment of her waking that he had gone away, that it was all over; but her mind, when it had time to think, rejected that idea; he would not, could not have gone without a word, without even saying farewell, without asking her—anything, anything—to forgive him or to forget him, or to be faithful to him, or not to believe what was said against him. One or other of these things Aubrey must say to her before he went away. Therefore, he could not have gone away, and everything was still possible. In her passion and pride she had refused last night to let her mother tell her what it was. She had resolved that Aubrey should be present, that he should hear the accusation against him, that he should give his own explanation—that was only just, she said to herself—the poorest criminal had a right to that! And Aubrey should have it. He should not, whatever papa said

and whatever mamma said, be condemned unheard. She dressed in great haste and rang the bell energetically to ascertain if he had come back. But the chambermaid who answered Bee's bell was stupid and could not understand what Herr it was about whom the young lady questioned her so closely. Had he come back? Oh, yes, she believed all the Herren had come back; there was not a bed to be had in the house. But what Herr was it whom the gracious young lady sought. The old gentleman in the next room, who was so ill? She heard that he was little a better this morning—or the young Herr in number ten, or the Herr whose eyes were so bad, who was going to the great doctor in Düsseldorf? Perhaps poor Bee's German was at fault. She was still attempting to make the matter clear when Moulsey came in with the news that Mrs. Kingsward was very poorly, and had not slept at all, a statement which Betty, rushing in half-dressed, confirmed anxiously. "Mamma has had a very bad night; and what is the matter, Bee, that we are all at sixes and sevens, and why did you lock your door? I came up as soon as I could—as soon as Charlie would let me. He said it was dreadful, nobody coming down, and that we must eat through the dinner for the sake of appearances. And Aubrey never showing neither, and me obliged to sleep in mamma's room because you had locked the door."

"I want to know," said Bee, "whether Aubrey came back last night."

"Oh, how should I know?" said Betty, "and why

shouldn't he come back? Of course he must have come back. Is he going anywhere else but home? I wish people would not get letters," said the girl. "You are all so ridiculous since those letters came last night. Letters are nice when they are nice. But, oh! how much nicer it was yesterday morning when you had none, and we were all quite happy, and mamma well, and Aubrey and you as funny as you could be!"

There flashed upon Bee as she spoke the whole bright panorama of yesterday. Not a cloud in the sky nor a trouble in the world. Mamma as fresh as the morning, the river shining, the steamboat thrilling through the water with a shiver of pleasure in its wooden sides, every group adding amusement, and they themselves affording it, no doubt, to the rest. How conscious they had been when they laughed under their breath at the young German pairs, that they themselves were lovers too, quite as happy, if not so demonstrative. Oh! yesterday—yesterday! You might as well say last century for anything that resembled it now. Bee turned almost fiercely to Moulsey, who stood looking on with that air of knowing all about it which so often exasperated the girls, and requested her to go downstairs immediately and ask if Mr. Leigh had come back. Moulsey hesitated and protested that the chambermaid would know. "And you that know the language, Miss Bee."

"Go down directly and inquire if Mr. Leigh has come back. You know the waiter that speaks such

good English as well as I do," said Bee, peremptorily. And Moulsey could do nothing but obey.

Yes, Mr. Leigh had come back; he had occupied his room, but was not yet up so far as the attendants knew. There came such a change on Bee's face at this news as startled both the curious observers. The light grew less fierce, more like the usual sunny brightness in her eyes. A softening came over her face. Her colour flashed back. "I want to know when mamma is coming downstairs," she said. "Moulsey—or no, stop. I'll go myself and see."

Moulsey was so roused that she caught the young lady by the arm. "If it was your papa himself, my lady shan't be disturbed," she said. "And not by you, Miss Bee, as are the cause of it all; not if you should put a knife into me afore her door."

"How dare you say I am the cause of it all?"

"Because it's the truth," said the enraged maid. "She was worried enough before by those letters, and you coming in like the wind, like your papa himself, as I always said you were his living image; and stopping her in the middle of her little bit of cutlet that would have given her strength, and questioning of her like a drum-major, and pacing up and down outside the door like a wild beast. Mind my words: you don't know, none of you, how little strength my poor lady's got. And you're all so masterful, every one, with mamma here and mamma there, and you'll not find out till it's too late——"

"But mamma's better," cried Betty. "She has taken her cure, and she's all right till next year."

"I only wish as you may all find it so, miss," said Moulsey, folding her arms across her broad chest and shaking her head.

Bee was awe-struck for a moment by this speech, but she knew that Moulsey was always a croaker, and it was quite true about the cure. She paused a little uncertain, and then she resumed in a subdued voice—

"I never want to disturb mamma. But Moulsey, we've got to leave here to-day."

"That can't be," said Moulsey, decisively. "My lady is not fit to travel after such a bad night, and I won't have it," she said. "The doctor has put my lady into my hands, and he says 'She's not to be overtired. Mind, I don't respond for nothing if she's overtired.' And she just shan't go—that's flat. And you may all say what you like, and your papa, too."

"Not to-day?" said Bee, with another change of countenance. It flashed upon her that another day's delay would give time for all the explanations in which she could not help hoping. Her excited pulses calmed down a little. She was not alarmed about her mother. Had she been so, it would no doubt have given her thoughts another direction. But Bee knew nothing of illness, much less anything of death. She was not afraid of them. In her experience people might be ill occasionally, but they always got better. Mamma, too, would be better presently, when she got up; and then they could all meet, and the letters and the whole matter could be

discussed. And it seemed to be impossible — impossible that from this some better conclusion could not be arrived at. There had been so much confusion last night, when it burst upon them like a thunder-stroke. When looked at calmly, without flurry or haste, the better moment would bring better views, and who could say that all might not yet be well?

CHAPTER VI.

EMBOLDENED by this thought Bee went downstairs to breakfast, which was spread again in the verandah in the warm sunshine of the autumnal morning. The new hope, though it were a forlorn one, restored her youthful appetite as well as her courage, and her coffee and roll were a real restorative after the long fast and agitated night. But there was no appearance of Aubrey, neither at the table nor in the passages, nor anywhere about. He seemed to have disappeared as if he had never been. When Charlie came down from his mother's room, where he had been shut up with her for some time, Bee, who had no particular respect for Charlie's opinion or inclination to allow him any authority over herself, such as an elder brother is sometimes supposed to have, began at once to question him. "Where is Aubrey?" she said. "Why doesn't he come to breakfast? Will you go and look for Aubrey, Charlie?"

"Indeed, I will do no such thing," said Charlie, almost roughly. "I hope he has had the sense to go away. I should just like to see him come calmly down to breakfast as if nothing had happened. If he came, then I can answer for it, you should not be allowed to say a word to him, Bee."

"Who should prevent me?" cried Bee, looking up with her eyes on fire and her nostrils dilating. She had not noticed before what a cloud was upon Charlie's face and how heavy and scowling were his brows. She added, springing up, "We shall soon see about that. If you think I shall do what you tell me, or condemn any man unheard——"

"The cad! He never denied it. You can ask mamma."

"I will not ask anyone but Mr. Leigh," said Bee, throwing back her head; "and I advise you to mind your own business, and not to call names that may come back upon yourself."

"Stop where you are, Bee. I never went out into the world under false pretences. A man is a cad when he does that."

"I shall not stop for you, nor anyone but my parents," said Bee, in a splendid flush of anger, her countenance glowing, her eyes blazing. "Stand out of my way. Oh, if that is all, and you want to make a scene for the edification of the tourists, I can go in by the other door."

And she did so, leaving Charlie standing flushed and angry, but quite unable, it need scarcely be said, to coerce his sister. To make an attempt of

this kind, which comes to nothing, is confusing and humiliating. He looked round angrily for a moment to see if it were possible to intercept her, then, yielding to necessity, sat down where Betty, eager and full of a thousand questions, sat calling for explanations. That is the good of a family party, there is always someone ready to hear what you have to say.

Bee went at once to the English-speaking waiter, and asked for Mr. Leigh, whom the man, curious as all lookers-on are at a social drama going on under their eyes, declared to be still in his room. She sent him off instantly with a message, and stood in the hall awaiting his return, angry and brave, like the rose in George Herbert's poem, yet soon getting shamefaced and troubled, as the people coming and going, travellers, visitors, attendants, stared at her and brushed against her as they passed. Bee never forgot all her life the gleam of the river at the foot of the steps, of which she had a glimpse through the doorway—the Rhine barges slowly crossing that little space of vision, the little boats flitting across the gleam of the rosy morning, and the strong flowing tide, the figures going up and down breaking the prospect.

The man came back to her after a time, looking half sympathetic, half malicious, with the message that the gentleman was just going out.

"Just going out!" She repeated the words half-consciously. "Was it Aubrey that sent her that message? Aubrey—who yesterday would not let her

out of his sight, who followed her everywhere, saw every sign she made, heard every word almost before it was spoken!" The surprise and the pang together made her heart sick. She could not rush upstairs and knock at his door and call him out imperatively, to tell her immediately what it all meant—at least, though it occurred to her that this would be the most natural thing to do, she did not. Intimidated by the circumstances, by the half impertinence of the waiter, by the stare of the people about, she reflected for a moment breathlessly that he must come out this way, and that if she remained there she must see him. But Bee's instinct of a young woman, now for the first time awakened, made her shrink from this. When she was only a little girl, so very short a time ago, she did not mind who looked at her, who pushed past her. But now everything was different!

She went away, still holding her head high that nobody (above all not Charlie, who was watching her through the glass of the verandah) should guess that her courage was drooping, and going into the deserted sitting-room, where last night that blow had fallen upon her, sat down and wrote to her lover a hurried little note:

"Oh, Aubrey, what is the matter? Have you deserted me without a word? Do you think I am like them, to take up any report? I don't know what report there is—I don't know what it is, this terrible thing that has come between us. What is it? I will take your word and nobody else's. I don't believe you have done anything that is wrong. Aubrey! come and tell me

out of your own mouth. I told mamma last night I would hear nothing unless you were there; but you were gone away, they said. And now you send me word that you are going out and can't see me. Going out and can't see *me*! What does it all mean?

"If it is some fad of honour, of not seeing me against *their* will—though I do think your first duty is to me, Aubrey, before anyone else in the world—but if it should be so, mamma will be down here at twelve o'clock—and I invite you to meet her, to hear what is said, to answer for yourself and for me. If you have done anything wrong, what does that matter? Don't we all do wrong? And why should it come between you and me? Am I without sin that I should throw stones at you? Aubrey, you can't throw everything away without a word. You can't desert me without a word. I can bear anything—anything, rather than this.

"Your BEE——."

Bee, poor child, shrank from intrusting this to the impertinent waiter, who had a leer in his eye as if he were defending his own side from the importunities of the other. She went out furtively into the hall and studied the numbers of the rooms and the names of the tenants upon the board, necessity quickening her perceptions, and then she stole upstairs and gave her poor little appeal into the hands of the stout chambermaid who watched over that part of the hotel. It was for the Herr in No. 10, and the answer was to be brought immediately to the little salon No. 20 downstairs. "Eine Antwort," she said over and over again in her imperfect speech. "Schnell, schnell!" This, with the aid of a thaler—for it was before the days of the mark—produced perfect understanding in the mind of the maid, who

with becks and wreathed smiles accepted the commission, and in a short time brought her back the answer for which she waited with feverish anxiety. It was very much shorter than her own.

"I am not worthy to stand before you. I cannot and I must not take advantage of your innocence; better I should disappear altogether than wound your ears with what they say. But I will not since you will it so. At twelve o'clock then, Bee, my darling, I will stand up before your mother, and say what I can for myself. Bee, my own dearest, my only hope!"

This last was scrawled across the paper as if he had put it in after the despair of the former part. It was this that the poor little girl fixed upon—the sweet words to which she had been accustomed, which her heart was fainting for. It was not, one would have said, a very cheerful note for a love-letter. But Bee was ridiculously cheered by it. So long as she was his own dearest, his hope, his darling—so long as there was no change in his love for her—why then, in the long run, whatever was said, everything must come right.

I need not follow Bee to her mother's bedside, when Mrs. Kingsward woke and for the first moment did not remember what had happened.

"Is that you, Bee?" she said, smiling, not thinking.

"Are you better, mamma?"

"Oh, yes, just in my usual——," said Mrs. Kingsward. And then she caught a fuller sight of her daughter's face. Bee had none of her usual pretty colour, the light in her eyes was like fire. The mother gave a little feeble cry, and in a moment was

no longer in her usual, but lost in the feverish mists of a trouble far too great for her to bear. "Oh, Bee! Oh, Bee!"

"We had better not say anything about it, mamma, to agitate you. I have told him you will be ready at twelve o'clock, that I may know what the story is, and what he has to say."

Mrs. Kingsward struggled up to a sitting position. "At twelve o'clock? No! I cannot, I cannot!" Then she dropped back upon her pillows sobbing, "Oh, Bee, spare me; I am not equal to it. There is Charlie can read your papa's letter. Bee! Bee!"

"Charlie!" cried Bee, with a flash of fury. "Who is Charlie, that he should sit in judgment on Aubrey and me? If he has anything to do with it, I tell you, mamma, I will go away. I will go with Aubrey. I will not hear a word."

"Oh, Bee," cried Mrs. Kingsward, holding out her hot, feverish hands, "I am not fit for it! I am not fit for it! If I am to travel to-morrow—ask Moulsey—I ought to stop in bed and be quiet all day."

"I don't see that it matters," said Bee, sternly, "whether we travel to-morrow or in a week. To go home will be no pleasure to me."

"If we were there, then papa could manage it all himself; he is the proper person. On a journey is not the time to settle things so important. I will write and tell him I have put it all off, and have not said anything, till he could do it himself."

"But that will not be true," cried the young Rhadamanthus, inexorable, with her blazing eyes.

"O Bee! you are dreadfully, dreadfully hard upon me!" the poor young mother said. This is the drawback of being so young a mother, just as young as your grown-up children. It is very delightful, when all is sunny and bright, but in a great emergency like this it is trying for all parties when a girl's mother is only, so to speak, a girl like herself. Bee lifted up her absolute young head, and gave forth her ultimatum unmoved.

"Well, mamma, it must be as you choose. If you think my happiness is of less consequence than the chance of a headache to yourself, I have naturally nothing more to say."

A headache! That was all she knew.

Mrs. Kingsward was ready by twelve o'clock, much against Moulsey's will, who dressed her mistress under protest. "I ain't one to interfere with what's going on in a family," said Moulsey, as she combed out the long locks, tangled with the restlessness of a troubled night, which were as silky and as smooth as Bee's. "I'm only a servant, and I knows my place; but you're not fit to struggle among them young ones. The nursery children, it's all very well; if they're naughty you whip them, or you put them in a corner, and there's a good cry and all right again. But when it comes to a business with a young lady and a gentleman, the Colonel ought to have come himself, or he ought to have put it off till we all got home."

"Oh, I wish, I wish he had!" Mrs. Kingsward said, sighing. "I am not in the least what I used to be, Moulsey; don't you think I am very different from what I used to be? I have not half the strength."

"There often is," said Moulsey, "a time when a lady isn't so strong, after all these children and everything. It takes a deal out of you, it do. And I don't hold much with them foreign cures. I'm one that stands for home. And there's where you ought to be, ma'am, whatever anyone may say."

"I am sure it is where I wish to be," said the poor lady, "but we must not be unjust, Moulsey. My cure did me a great deal of good, and I liked being out and seeing everything just as much as the girls."

"That is just it, ma'am," said Moulsey; "you're a deal too much the same as the young ladies, and can't make up your mind as you haven't the strength for it. I'm not one to ask any questions, but I can't help seeing there's something wrong. Don't you give in to Miss Bee in everything. I wouldn't go down to make up the quarrel if I was you. Leave 'em to themselves, and it'll all come right. Bless us, lovers' quarrels is nothing—it wouldn't be half the fun if it wasn't for that."

Moulsey knew very well this was no lovers' quarrel; but it seemed to her a good way of satisfying herself what it was.

"Oh, if that were all!" sighed the poor lady. "Moulsey, you are an old friend, and take an interest

in the family. You have known Miss Bee since ever she was born. I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. It is no quarrel; it's something the Colonel has heard about Mr. Leigh."

"All lies, ma'am, I don't make no manner of doubt."

"Do you think so, Moulsey; oh, do you think so? Have you heard anything? You often know more, hearing the servants speak, than we do. If you have any light to throw on the subject, oh, do so, do! I shall be grateful to you all my life."

"I don't know as I have any light to throw. I knew as there was some trouble at the time the poor young lady died—some friend of hers, as Mr. Leigh, being a kind-hearted gentleman, couldn't turn out of the house—and it made a talk. But if there was anything wrong, you take my word, ma'am, it was none of his fault."

"Ah, it's so easy to say that, Moulsey; but the man must bear the blame."

"I've always heard, ma'am, as it was the woman that got the blame; and right enough, for they often deserve it the most," Moulsey said.

"Oh, I wish—I wish, whoever was to blame, that it was not I that had to clear it up," poor Mrs. Kingsward said.

"Oh, cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right."

She would not have said this, poor lady. She would have thought it swearing and unbecoming for

a woman's lips; still, Hamlet's sentiment was hers, with much stronger reason. She looked like anything but a strong representative of justice as she went downstairs. Charlie had come to give her his arm, and though he was very tender to her, Charlie had no idea of sparing her any more than Bee. He, too, thought that it was only the risk of a headache, and that a headache was no such great matter. Charlie's idea was, however, that what the governor said was, of all things on earth, the most important to be carried out—especially when it did not concern himself.

Bee was sitting at the window looking out upon the river, seeing the reflections flash and the boats pass. The steamer had just started with its lively freight—the steam-boat which had brought them down the stream yesterday, with all its changing groups, and the pairs of German lovers with their arms about each other in the beatitude of the betrothal. All just the same, but how different, how different! She did not rise, but only turned her head when her mother came in. She was on the other side. She did not see, with so many other things in her head, how fragile Mrs. Kingsward looked. Betty was the only one who perceived at all that mamma was less strong than usual, and even Betty took no notice, for she, too, was on the other side. As for Charlie, he stood behind her, a sort of representative of executive force at the back of Justice, backing her authority up. It was he who arranged her chair, her footstool, the shawl Moulsey

had insisted she should wear, and which Charlie, who knew nothing about shawls, huddled up about her neck, not unlike the judge's ermine. He did it all, not with sympathetic touches as the girls would have done had they not been on the other side, but rather with an eye to her dignity as a representative of the law.

And then, just as the hour of noon sounded from all the church clocks, Aubrey came in. He was very pale, but dressed with care, no symptoms of neglect about him, with an air of preparation which became a man who was going to stand his trial. Bee jumped up from her seat and went up to him, putting her hand through his arm, and Betty, half-frightened, with a glance at her mother, offered him a timid hand. She sat down behind them, on a chair that was ranged against the wall. The defendant's side was her side. She wanted to show that, and yet not to go against mamma. Charlie took no notice at all of the new comer, but stood scowling, looking at nobody, behind his mother's chair.

Mrs. Kingsward, frightened at her own dignity and breathless with agitation, cried, "Oh, Mr. Leigh!" which was a kind of salutation. She had some papers in her lap, over which her hands fluttered restlessly, her husband's letter, and something else beside, and she looked at the group before her with a little dubious smile, asking pardon of the culprit whom she had come here—oh, so much against her will—to try for his life.

"Now, mamma," said Bee, in a cheerful voice, "we are quite ready, Aubrey and I—"

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. KINGSWARD'S opening speech was a wonder to hear. She sat and looked at them all for a moment, trying to steady herself, but there was nothing to steady her in what she saw before her—Aubrey and Bee, the pair who had been so sweet to see, such a diversion in all circumstances, so amusing in their mutual absorption, so delightful in their romance. It all flashed back to her mind; the excitement of Bee's first proposal, the pleasure of seeing "her bairn respected like the lave," though Mrs. Kingsward might not have understood what these words meant, the little triumph it was to see her child engaged at nineteen, when everybody said there was nobody for the girls to marry—and now to have that triumph turned into humiliation and dismay! And to think of Bee's bright face overcast, and her happiness over, and poor Aubrey thrown out into the uttermost darkness. Had she seen Charlie it might have given her some support, for Charlie was the impersonation of immovable severity; but Betty's wistful little face behind the other pair, coming out from Aubrey's shadow by moments to fix an appealing look upon her mother, was not calculated to make her any stronger. She

cleared her throat—she tried hard to steady her voice. She said, “Oh, my dear children,” faltering, and then the poor lady ended in a burst of sobbing and tears. It gave her a little sting and stimulant to see through her weeping that though little Betty ran towards her with kisses and soothing, Bee took no notice, but stood hard and unaffected in her opposition, holding close to Aubrey’s arm. Mrs. Kingsward indeed got no sympathy except from little Betty. Charlie put his hand imperatively upon her shoulder, recalling her to herself, and Bee never moved, standing by the side of Aubrey Leigh. The mother, thus deserted, plucked up a little spirit in the midst of her weakness.

“Bee,” she said, “I do not think it is quite nice of you to stand there as if your own people were against you. We are not against you. There has been, I fear, a great mistake made, which Colonel Kingsward”—here she turned her eyes to Aubrey—“has found out in—in time; though it is a pity, a sad pity, that it was not found out before. If Mr. Aubrey had only been frank and said at once—but I don’t see what difference that would have made. Papa says that from what he has heard and discovered things must not go any further. He is sorry, and so am I, that they have gone so far, and the engagement must be broken off at once. You hear what I say, Bee?”

“I heard you say so last night, mamma, but I say it is my engagement, and I have a right to know why. I do not mean to break it off——”

"Oh, how can I make explanations—how can I enter into such a question? I appeal to you, Mr. Aubrey—tell her."

"She ought not to ask any explanations. She is a minor, under age. My father has a right to do whatever he pleases—and she has none to ask why."

This was how Charlie reasoned on the height of his one-and-twenty years. Charlie was the intolerable element in all this question. Aubrey cast a look at him, and forcibly closed his own lips to keep in something that was bursting forth. Bee defied him, as was natural, on the spot. "I will not have Charlie put in his opinion," she cried. "He has nothing to do with me. Even if I obeyed papa, I certainly should not obey him."

"Let Aubrey say, himself," said Mrs. Kingsward, "whether you ought to be told everything, Bee."

"It is cruel to ask me," said Aubrey, speaking for the first time. "If Bee could know all—if you could know all, Mrs. Kingsward! But how could I tell you all? Part of this is true, and part is not true. I could speak to Colonel Kingsward more freely. I am going off to-night to London to see him. It will free you from embarrassment, and it will give me perhaps a chance. I did not want to put you to this trial. I am ready to put myself unreservedly in Colonel Kingsward's hands."

"Then," said Bee, hastily, "it seems I am of no sort of importance at all to anyone. I am told my engagement is broken off, and then I am told I am

not to know why, and then——. Go, then, Aubrey, as that is your choice, and fight it out with papa, if you please." She loosed her arm from his, with a slight impulse, pushing him away. "But just mind this—everybody," she cried; "you may think little of Bee—but my engagement shall not be broken by anybody but me, and it shall not be kept on by anybody but me; and I will neither give it up nor will I hold to it, neither one nor the other, until I know why."

Then the judge and the defendant looked each other in the face. They were, as may be supposed, on opposite sides, but they were the only two to consult each other in this emergency. Aubrey responded by a movement of his head, by a slight throwing up of his hand, to the question in Mrs. Kingsward's eyes.

"Then you shall know as much as I can tell you, Bee. Your father had a letter last week, from a lady, telling him that she had a revelation to make. The letter alarmed your father. He felt that he must know what it meant. He could not go himself, but he sent Mr. Passavant, the lawyer. The lady said that she had lived in Mr. Leigh's house for years, in the time of his late wife. She said Mr. Leigh had—had behaved very badly to her."

"That I do not believe," said Bee.

The words flashed out like a knife. They made a stir in the air, as if a sudden gleam had come into it. And then all was still again, a strange dead quiet coming after, in which Bee perceived Aubrey

silent, covering his face with his hand. It came across her with a sudden pang that she had heard somebody say this morning or last night—"He did not deny it."

"And that he had promised her—marriage—that he was engaged to her, as good as—as good as married to her—when he had the cruelty—oh, my dear child, my dear child!—to come to you."

Aubrey took his hand away from his white face. "That," he said, in a strange, dead, tuneless voice, „is not true."

"Oh, more shame to you, Aubrey, more shame to you," cried Mrs. Kingsward, forgetting her judicial character in her indignation as a woman, "if it is not true!—" She paused a moment to draw her breath, then added, "But indeed you were not so wicked as you say, for it is true. And here is the evidence. Oh!" she cried, with tears in her eyes, "it makes your conduct to my child worse; but it shows that you were not then, not then, as bad as you say."

Bee had dropped into the chair that was next to her, and there sat, for her limbs had so trembled that she could not stand, watching him, never taking her eyes from him, as if he were a book in which the interpretation of this mystery was——

"Never mind about me," he said, hoarsely. "I say nothing for myself. Allow me to be as bad as man can be, but that is not true. And what is the evidence? You never told me there was any evidence."

"Sir," said Mrs. Kingsward, fully roused, "I told you all that was in my husband's letter last night."

"Yes—that she," a sort of shudder seemed to run over him, to the keen sight of the watchers—"that she—said so. You don't know, as I do, that *that* is no evidence. But you speak now as if there was something more."

She took a piece of folded paper from her lap. "There is this," she said, "a letter you wrote to her the morning you went away."

"I did write her a letter," he said.

Mrs. Kingsward held it out to him, but was stopped by Charlie, who put his hand on her arm. "Keep this document, mother. Don't put the evidence against him into a man's power. I'll read it if Mr. Leigh thinks proper."

Once more Aubrey and Bee together, with a simultaneous impulse, looked at this intruder into their story.

"Mamma! send him away. I should like to kill him!" said Bee within her clenched teeth.

"Be quiet, Charlie. Mr. Leigh, I am ready to put this or any other evidence against you into your hands."

He bowed very gravely, and then stood once more as if he were made of stone. Mrs. Kingsward faltered very much, her agitated face flushed. "It begins," she said, in a low fluttering voice, "My dear little wife——"

Then there came a very strange sound into the agitated silence, for Aubrey Leigh, on trial for more

than his life, here laughed. "What more, what more?" he said.

"No, it is not that. It is—'I don't want my dear little wife to be troubled about anything. It can all be done quite easily and quietly, without giving an occasion for people to talk; a settlement made and everything you could desire. I shall make arrangements about everything to-day.' It is signed A. L., and it is in your handwriting. Bee, you can see it is in his handwriting; look for yourself."

Bee would not turn her head. She thought she saw the writing written in fire upon the air—all his familiar turns in it. How well she knew the A. L.; but she did not look at it—would not look. She had enough to do looking at his face, which was the letter—the book she was studying now.

"No doubt it is my handwriting," he said, "only it was addressed not to any other woman, but to my wife."

"Your wife died two years ago, Mr. Leigh; and that is dated Christmas—this year."

"That is a lie!" he cried; then restrained himself painfully. "You know I don't mean you—but the date and the assumption is entirely a lie. Give me time, and I will tell you exactly when it was written. I remember the letter. It was when I had promised Amy to provide for her friend on condition that she should be sent away—for she made my house miserable."

"And yet—and yet, Mr. Leigh——. Oh, don't you see how things contradict each other? She made

your house miserable, and yet——when your wife was dead, and you were free——”

He looked at her, growing paler and paler. “And yet!” he said. “I know what you mean. That is the infernal art of it. My own folly has cut the ground from beneath my feet, and put weapons into every hand against me. I know—I know.”

Again there came into Bee’s mind the words she had heard last night—“He does not deny it.” And yet he was denying it with all his might! Denying, and not denying—what? The girl’s brain was all in a maze, and she could not tell.

“You see?” said Mrs. Kingsward, gently. “Oh, I am sorry for you in my heart. Perhaps you were led into—a connection that you feel not to be—desirable. That I can understand. But that you should think you could save yourself by means of an innocent girl, almost a child, and impose yourself on a family that had no suspicions!—oh, Mr. Leigh, Mr. Leigh! you ought to have died sooner than have done that!”

He looked at her piteously for a moment, and then a dreadful sort of smile came upon his face. “I allow,” he said, “that that would have been the best.”

And there fell a silence upon the room. The sun was shining outside, and the sound of the water gurgling against the sides of boats, and of all the commotion of the landing place, and of the hundreds of voices in the air, and of the chiming of the clocks, came in and filled the place. And just then there

burst out a carillon from one of the steeples setting the whole to music, harmonising all the discords, and sweeping into this silence with a sudden rush of sound as if some bodily presence had come in. It was the touch too much for all these excited and troubled people. Mrs. Kingsward lay back in her chair and began to weep silently. Aubrey Leigh turned away from where he was standing and leant his head against the wall. As for Bee, she sat quite still, dazed, not able to understand, but crushed out of all her youthful self-assertion and determination to clear it all up. She to clear it up!—who did not even understand it, who could not fathom what was meant. That there was something more than met the eye, something that was not put into words, seemed to show vaguely through the words that were said. But what it was Bee could not tell. She could not understand it all. And yet that there was a fatal obstacle rising up between her and her lover, something which no one could disperse or clear away, not a mistake, not a falsehood, not a thing that could be passed over triumphantly and forgotten—not as youth is so quick to believe a mere severity, tyranny, arbitrary conclusion of papa—she felt in every fibre of her frame. She could not deny it or struggle against it; her very being seemed paralysed. The meaning went out of her face, the absolute, certain, imperious youthfulness died out of her. She who loved to have her own way, who had just protested that she would neither give up nor hold fast except by her own will and understanding, now sat dumb,

vaguely staring, seeing shadows pass before her and hearing of things which were undeniable, mighty things, far more powerful than her little hot resolutions and determinations. Bee had never yet come face to face with any trouble which could not be smoothed away. There was her own naughtiness, there were Charlie's escapades at school and college—some of which she had known were serious. But in a little while they had been passed over and forgotten, and everything had been as before. One time she remembered papa had threatened not to let Charlie go back to Harrow, which was a dreadful thing, exposing him and his naughtiness to all the world. But after a while papa had changed his mind, and everything had gone smoothly as before. Could papa change his mind now? Would time make it, even if he did, as it was before? Bee had not mental power enough to think these things, or ask these questions of her own will. But they went through her mind as people come in and go out by an open door.

It was Aubrey who was the first to speak. The carillon stopped, or else they got used to the sound and took no further notice of it, and he collected himself and came forward again to the middle of the room. He said, "I know it will be a relief that I should go away. There is an afternoon train which I shall take. It is slow, but it does not matter. I shall be as well there as anywhere—or as ill. I shall go direct to Colonel Kingsward and lay my whole case before him. He will perhaps confront

me with my accuser—I hope so—if not, he will at least hear what I have to say for myself.”

“Oh, Mr. Leigh! Oh, Aubrey! I can’t wish you anything but well, whatever—whatever may be done!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Kingsward, I looked for nothing less from your kind heart. Will you give me that letter?”

She put it into his hands without the least hesitation, and he examined it—with a sort of strained smile upon his face. “I should like to take this back to Colonel Kingsward,” he said. Then added quickly with a short laugh, “No, I forgot; there might be suspicions. Send it back to him, please, by the first post, that he may have it when I get there.” He gave the letter back, and then he looked round wistfully. “May I say good-bye to Bee?”

She got up at the words, feeling herself vaguely called upon—yet quite dull, dumb, with all sorts of thoughts going and coming through those wide-open doors of her mind—thoughts like strays which she seemed to see as they passed. Even Aubrey himself appeared a ghost. She got up and stood awaiting him when he approached her, not putting out a finger. Nobody interfered, not even Charlie, who was fuming internally yet somehow did not move. Aubrey went up to her and put his hands upon her shoulders. Her unresponsiveness sent a chill to his heart.

“Have you given me up, Bee?” he cried, “Already, already!” with anguish in his voice.

She could not say a word. She shook her head like a mute, looking at him with her dazed eyes.

"She does not understand it—not a word!" he said.

Bee shook her head again. It was all she could do. No, she did not understand, except that it was a kind of dying, something against which nobody could struggle. And then he kissed her on her forehead as gravely as though he had been her father; and the next moment was gone—was it only out of the room, or out of the world, out of life?

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a slow train. The slowest train that there is, is, of course, far, far quicker than any other mode of conveyance practicable in a land journey, but it does not seem so. It seems as if it were delay personified to the eager traveller, especially on the Continent. In England, when it stops at a multiplicity of stations at which there is nothing to do, it at least goes on again in most cases after it has dropped its half-passenger or taken in its empty bag of letters. But this can never be said of a German or even of a brisker Belgian train. The one in which Aubrey was meandered about Liege, for instance, till he had mastered every aspect of that smoky but interesting place. It stopped for what looked like an hour at every little roadside station, in order, apparently, that the guard might hold a long and excited conversation about nothing at all with the head man of the place. And all the while the little electric bell would go tingling, tingling upon his very brain. Thus he made his slow and weary progress through the afternoon and evening, stopping long at last at a midnight station (where everything was wrapped in sleep and darkness) for the arrival of the express, in which the latter portion of the journey was to be accomplished

more quickly. If there had been anything wanted to complete the entire overthrow of a spirit in pain it was such an experience. All was dismal beyond words at the place where he had to wait—one poor light showing through the great universe of darkness, the dark big world that encompassed it around—one or two belated porters wandering through the blackness doing mysterious pieces of business, or pretending to do them. A poor little wailing family—a mother and two children, put out there upon a bench from some other train, one of the babies wailing vaguely into the dark, the other calling upon “mamma, mamma,” driving the poor mother frantic—were waiting like himself. It gave Aubrey a momentary consolation to see something that appeared at least to the external eye more forlorn than he. He remembered, too, that there had once been a baby cry that went to his heart, and though all the associations connected with that had now turned into gall and bitterness, so that the sound seemed like a spear penetrating his very being, and he walked away as far as the bounds of the station would allow, to get, if possible, out of hearing of it—yet pity, a better inspiration, at last gained the day. He went up and spoke to the woman, and found that she was an English workman’s wife making her way home with her children to a mother who was dying. They had turned her out here, with her babies, to wait—ah, not for the express train which was to carry on the gentleman, but for the slow, slow-creeping third-class which only started in the morning, and which would,

after other long waits at other places, reach England sometime, but she could scarcely tell when.

"And must you pass the night here out in the cold?" said Aubrey.

"It isn't not to call a cold night, sir," said the woman, meekly, "and they've got plenty on to keep them warm."

"I'll try and get them to open the waiting-room for you," said Aubrey.

"Oh, no, sir; thank you kindly, but don't take the trouble—the rooms are that stuffy. It's better for them in the open air, and they'll go to sleep in a little while. Baby will be quite warm on my lap, and Johnny's lying against me."

"And what is to become of you in this arrangement?" said Aubrey, looking pitifully, with eyes that had known the experiences both of husband and father, upon this little plump human bed, which was to stand in the place of down pillows for the children.

"Oh, I'll do very well, sir, when they go to sleep," she said, looking up at him with a smile.

"And when does your train go?"

"Not till six in the morning," she replied; "but perhaps that's all the better, for I'll be able to get them some bread and milk, and a good wash before we start."

Well, it was not much of an indulgence for a man who was well off. He might have thrown it away on any trifle, and nobody would have wasted a thought on the subject. He got hold of one of

the wandering ghosts of porters, and got him, with a *douceur*, to change the poor woman's cheap ticket for her into one for the express, and commissioned him, if possible, to get her a place in a sleeping carriage, where, I fear, she was not likely to be at all a warmly welcomed addition to the luxurious young men or delicate ladies in these conveyances. He saw that there was one found for her which was almost empty when the train came up. He scarcely knew if she were young or old—though indeed, as a matter of fact, the poor little mother, bewildered by her sudden elevation among the gentlefolks, and not quite sure that she would not have preferred to remain where she was and pick up in the morning her natural third-class train, was both young and pretty, a fact that was remarked by the one young lady in the carriage, who saw the young man through the window at her side, and recognised him in a flash of the guard's lantern, with deep astonishment to see him handing in such a woman and such children to the privileged places. He disappeared himself into the dark, and indeed took his place in the corner of a smoking carriage, where his cigar was a faint soother of pain. In his human shortsightedness, poor Aubrey also was consoled a little, I think, by the thought that this poor fellow-passenger was comfortable—she and her children—and that instead of slumbering uneasily on a bench, she was able to lay the little things in a bed. It seemed to him a good omen, a little relaxation of the bonds of fate, and he went away cheered a little and encouraged

by this simple incident and by the warmth of the kindness that was in his heart.

He spoke to them again on one or two occasions on the way, sent the poor woman some tea in the morning, bought some fruit for the children, and again on the steamboat crossing, when he listened to the account of how they were going on, from Dover, with a certain interest. When they parted at the train he shook hands with the mother, hoping she would find her relation better, and put a sovereign into Johnny's little fat hand. The lady who had been in the sleeping carriage kept her eye upon him all the time. She was not by any means a malicious or bad woman, but she did not believe the poor woman's story of the gentleman's kindness. She was, I am sorry to say, a lady who was apt to take the worst view of every transaction, especially between men and women. People who do so are bound in many cases to be right, and so are confirmed in their odious opinion; but in many cases they are wrong, yet always hold to it with a faith which would do credit to a better inspiration. "I thought young Mr. Leigh was going to marry again," she said to a friend whom she met going up to town.

"Oh, so he is! To the nicest girl—Bee Kingsward, the daughter of one of my dearest friends—such a satisfactory thing in every way."

"Wasn't there something," said the lady of the sleeping carriage, "about a woman, down at his place in the country?"

"Oh, I don't think there was ever anything

against him. There was a woman who was a great friend of his poor wife, and lived with them. The wife was a goose, don't you know, and could not be made to see what a foolish thing it was. My opinion is that he never could abide the woman, and I am sure she made mischief between them. But I believe that silly little Mrs. Leigh—poor thing, we should not speak ill of those that are gone—made him promise on her deathbed that this Miss Something-or-other should not be sent away from the house. It was a ridiculous arrangement, and no woman that respected herself would have done it. But she was poor, and it's a comfortable place, and, perhaps, as there was no friendship between them she may have thought it was no harm."

"Perhaps she thought she would get over him in time and make him marry her."

"Oh, I can't tell what she thought! He rushed off in a hurry at a moment's notice, nobody knowing what he intended, after the poor baby died, the very day of its funeral. Not much to be wondered at, poor young man, after all he had gone through. I don't know how things were settled with Miss Lance, but I believe that she has gone at last. And I am delighted to hear of his engagement. So will all his neighbours in the county be."

"I should not like a daughter of mine to marry a man like that."

"Why? I wish a daughter of mine could have the chance. Everybody likes him at home. Do you know anything of Aubrey Leigh?"

He did not know in the least that this talk was going on as the train went rushing on to town; his ears did not tingle. He was in the next carriage, divided only by a plank from these two ladies in their compartment. The woman who took the bad view of everything did not wish him any harm. She did not even think badly of him. She thought it was only human nature, and that young men will do that sort of thing, however nice they may be, and whatever you may say of morals and so forth. I do not think, though she had made that little conventional speech, that she would at all have hesitated to give her own daughter to Aubrey, provided that she had a daughter. His advantages were so evident, and the disadvantages, after all, had so little to do with actual life.

Aubrey did not present himself before Colonel Kingsward that night. He did not propose to follow him to Kingswarden, the old house in Kent, which was the sole remnant of territorial property belonging to the family. He wanted to have all his wits about him, to be cool and self-possessed, and able to remember everything, when he saw the man who had given him Bee and then had withdrawn her from his arms. He already knew Colonel Kingsward a little, and knew him as a man full of *bonhomie*, popular everywhere—a man of experience, who had been about the world, who knew men. By this time Aubrey had recovered his spirits a little. He thought it impossible that such a man, when a younger than himself laid bare his heart to him, could fail to

understand. It was true that the Colonel was probably a martinet in morals as he was in his profession, and Aubrey had that behind him which he could not deny. He would not attempt to gloss it over, to make excuses for it. He would lay his life in this man's hand as if he had been his confessor. And surely, surely the acknowledged sin would find absolution, the extenuating circumstances would be considered, the lie with which that accusation was accompanied would recoil upon the accuser. The young man buoyed himself up with these thoughts through the long evening. He did not go out or to his club, or anywhere where he was known. In September there are not so many inducements to stray about London. He sat in his room and thought of Bee, and wrote little letters to her, which were a relief to his mind though he knew he could not send them. By this time he reflected they must have started. They were beginning their journey as he ended his. He hoped that Charlie, that lout, would have the sense to take care of his mother, to see that she suffered as little as possible, to prevent her from having any trouble—which I fear was not the view at all that Charlie took of his duty to his mother. Aubrey, like all outsiders, had a clearer view of Mrs. Kingsward's condition than her family had arrived at. He was very sorry for her, poor, delicate, tender woman—and grieved to the bottom of his heart that this trouble should have come upon her through him. Bee was different. There would be so many ways, please God, if all went well—and he could not bring

himself to think that all would not go well—in which he could make it up to his Bee. Finally, he permitted himself to write a little letter to meet his darling on her return, and enclosed in it another to Mrs. Kingsward, directed to Kingswarden. They would receive it when they entered their house—and by that time, surely by that time, his letters would not be any longer a forbidden thing.

That morning it rained, and the London skies hung very low. The world had the effect of a room with a low roof, stifling and without air. He set out to walk to Colonel Kingsward's office. I forget whether the Intelligence Department of the War Office was in existence at that time, or if it has always been in existence only not so much heard of as in our vociferous days. If it did exist then, it was, of course, in Pall Mall, as we all know. Aubrey set out to walk, but soon recollected that muddy boots detracted from a man's appearance, especially in the eyes of a spick and span person like Colonel Kingsward, who never had a speck upon any garment, and accordingly he got into a hansom. It did not go any faster than the beating of his heart, and yet he could have wished that it should only creep along like the heavier cabs. He would have put off this interview now had he been able. To think that you are within an hour at most of the moment when your life shall be settled for you absolutely by another person's will, and that your happiness or unhappiness rest upon the manner in which he will look at the question, the perception he will have of your difficulties, the insight into your

heart, is a terrible thing—especially if you know little of the person who has thus become endowed, as it were, with the power of life and death over you—do not know if his understanding is a large or limited one, if he has any human nature in him, or only mere conventionality and the shell of human nature. It is seldom, perhaps, that one man is thus consciously in the power of another—and yet it must come to that more or less, every day.

Colonel Kingsward was in his room, seated at his writing table with piles of books and maps, and masses of newspapers all round him. He was an excellent linguist, and there were French papers and German papers, Russian, Scandinavian—all kinds of strange languages and strange little broad-sheets, badly printed, black with excessive ink, or pale with imperfect impression, on the floor and the table. He had a large paper-knife at his hand in ivory, with the natural brown upon it, looking like a weapon which could cut a man, not to say a book, in pieces. He looked up with an aspect which Aubrey, whose heart was in his mouth, could not read—whether it was mere politeness or something more—and bade Mr. Leigh be seated, putting aside deliberately as he did so the papers with which he was engaged. And then he turned round with the air of a man who says: Now you have my entire attention—and looked Aubrey in the face. The young man was facing the light which came in from a large high window reaching nearly to the roof. The elder man had his back half turned from it, so that his regard was less easy

to read. It was not quite fair. Aubrey had everything against him; his agitation, his anxiety, an expressive tell-tale face, and the light searching every change that took place in it; whilst his opponent was calm as his own paper knife, impassive, with a countenance formed to conceal his emotions, and the light behind him. It was not an equal match in any way.

"I have come direct from Cologne," Aubrey said.

"Ah, yes. I believe my wife says so in her letter."

"You have news from them to-day? I hope that Mrs. Kingsward is better."

"My wife never at any time speaks much of her health. She was a little fatigued and remained another day to rest."

"She is very delicate, sir," said Aubrey. He did not know why, unless it was reluctance to begin what he had to say.

"I am perfectly acquainted with Mrs. Kingsward's condition," said the Colonel, in a tone which was not encouraging. He added, "I don't suppose you took the trouble to come here, Mr. Leigh, in order to speak to me about my wife's health."

"No. It is true. I ought not to waste the time you have accorded me. I do not need to tell you, Colonel Kingsward, what I have come about."

"I think you do," said the Colonel, calmly. "My letter to my wife, which I believe she communicated to you, conveyed all I had to say on the matter. It

was not written without reflection, nor without every possible effort to arrive at the truth. Consequently, I have no desire to re-open the subject. It is in my mind concluded and put aside."

"But you will hear me?" said Aubrey. "You have heard one statement, surely you will hear the other. No man is condemned unheard. I have come here to throw myself upon your mercy—to tell you my story. However prejudiced you may be against me——"

"A moment, Mr. Leigh. I have no prejudice against you. I am not the judge of your conduct. I claim the right to decide for my daughter—that is all. I have no prejudice or feeling against you."

"Colonel Kingsward," cried Aubrey, "for God's sake listen! Hear what I have to say!"

The Colonel looked at him again. Perhaps it was the passion of earnestness in the young man's face that touched him. Perhaps he felt that it was unwise to leave it to be said that he had not heard both sides. The end was that he waved his hand and said:

"My time is not my own. I have no right to spend it on merely private interests; but if you will make your story as short as possible I will hear what you have to say."

CHAPTER IX.

THE story which Aubrey Leigh had to tell was indeed made as short as possible. To describe the most painful crisis in your life, the moment which you yourself shudder to look back at, which awakens in you that fury of self-surprise, horror and wonder which a sudden departure from all the habits of your life brings after it when it is guilt, is not an easy thing; but it supplies terse expressions and rapidity of narration. There is no desire to dwell upon the details, and to tell a story so deeply affecting one's self to a politely unsympathetic listener who does not affect to be much interested or at all moved by the subtle self-defence which runs through every such statement, is still more conducive to brevity. Aubrey laid bare the tempest that had swept over him with a breathless voice and broken words. He could not preserve his equanimity, or look as if it were an easy thing for him to do. He made the most hurried description of his visitor who had taken possession of his house, saying not a word beyond the bare fact. It had been deeply embarrassing that she should be there, though at first in the melancholy of his widowerhood he had not thought of it, or cared who was in the house. Afterwards he was prevented from doing

anything to disturb her by his promise to his dying wife. Then had come the anxiety about the baby, the wavering of that little life in which the forlorn young father had come to take a little pleasure. She had been very kind to the child, watching over it, and when the little thing died, when the misery of the fresh desolation, and the pity of it, and the overwhelming oppression of the sad house had quite overcome the spirit of its young master, then she had thrown herself upon him, with all the signs of a sudden passion of sympathy and tenderness. Had any confessor skilled in the accounts of human suffering heard Aubrey's broken tale he could have found nothing but truth in it, and would have recognised the subtle sequence of events which had led to that downfall. But Colonel Kingsward, though not unlearned in men, listened like a man of wood, playing with the large paper-knife, and never looking towards the penitent, who told his story with such a strain of the labouring breast and agonised spirit. Had a young officer in whom he had no particular interest thus explained and accounted for some dereliction of duty he might have understood or sympathised. But he had no wish to understand Aubrey; his only desire was to brush him off as quickly as possible, to be done with his ridiculous story, to hear of him no more. He might be as little guilty as he described himself. What then? Aubrey's character was nothing to Colonel Kingsward, except as it affected his daughter. He had cut him off from all connection with his daughter, and it was now quite immaterial to

him whether the man was a weak fool or a deceiver. Probably from as much as he heard while thus listening as little as he could, Leigh was in the former class, and certainly he did not intend to take a weak fool, who had shown himself to be at the mercy of any designing woman, into his family as the husband of Bee. Give him the benefit of the doubt, and allow that it had happened so, that the woman was much more to blame than the man, and what then? A sturdy sinner on the whole was not less but more easily pardoned than a weak fool.

"This is all very well, Mr. Leigh," Colonel Kingsward said, "and I am sorry that you have thought it necessary to enter into these painful details. They may be quite true. I will not offend you by doubting that you believe them to be quite true. But how, then, do you account for the letter which my wife, I believe, showed you, and which came direct from the lady's own hand to mine?"

"The letter was a letter which I wrote to my wife two years ago. There had been discussions between us on this very subject. I promised, on condition that Miss Lance should leave us, to make such arrangements for her comfort as were possible to me—to settle a yearly income on her, enough to live on."

"Was that arrangement ever carried out?"

"No; my wife became ill immediately after. I found her on my return in Miss Lance's arms, imploring that so long as she lived her friend should not be taken from her. What could I do? And that prayer was changed on my poor Amy's deathbed to

another—that I would never send Miss Lance away; that she should always have a home at Forest-leigh and watch over the child.”

“I don’t wish to arouse any such painful recollections—especially as they can be of no advantage to anyone—but how does this letter come to have the date of last Christmas, more than a year after Mrs. Leigh’s death?”

“How can I tell that, sir? How can I tell how the devilish web was woven at all? The note had no date, I suppose, and the person who could use it for this purpose would not hesitate at such a trifle as to add a date.”

“Mr. Leigh, I repeat the whole matter is too painful to be treated by me. But how is it, if you regarded this lady with those sentiments, that you should have in a moment changed them, and, to put the mildest interpretation upon your proceedings, thus put yourself in her power?”

The young man’s flushed and anxious face grew deadly pale. He turned his eyes from the inquisitor to the high blank light pouring in from the large window. “God knows,” he said, “that is what I cannot explain—or rather, I should say, the devil knows!” he cried with vehemence. “I was entirely off my guard—thinking, heaven knows, of nothing less.”

“The devil is a safe sort of agency to put the blame on. We cannot in ordinary affairs accept him as the scapegoat, Mr. Leigh—excuse me for saying so. I will not refuse to say that I allow there may be excuses for you, with a woman much alive to her

own interests and ready for any venture. You did write to her, however, on the day you left?"

"I wrote to her, telling her the arrangement I had proposed to my wife, in the very letter which she has sent to you—that I would carry it out at once, and that I hoped she would perceive, as I did, that it was impossible we should remain under the same roof, or, indeed, meet again."

"That was on what date?"

"The evening before my child's funeral. Next day, as soon as it was over, I left the house, and have never set foot in it again."

"Yet this lady, to whom you had, you say, sent such a letter, was at the funeral, and stood at the child's grave leaning on your arm."

"More than that," cried Aubrey, with a gasp of his labouring breath, "she came up to me as I stood there and put her arm, as if to support me, within mine."

The Colonel could not restrain an exclamation. "By Jove," he said, "she is a strong-minded woman, if that is true. Do you mean to say that this was after she had your letter?"

"I suppose so. I sent it to her in the morning. I was anxious to avoid any scene."

"And then, on your way to London, on that day, you went to your solicitors, and gave instructions in respect to Miss Lance's annuity—which you say now had been determined on long before."

"It was determined on long before."

"But never mentioned to any one until that time."

"I beg your pardon; on the day on which I

wrote that letter to my wife I went direct to my lawyer and talked the matter over freely with Mr. Morell, who had known me all my life, and knew all the circumstances—and approved my resolution, as the best of two evils, he said.”

“This is the most favourable thing I have heard, Mr. Leigh. He will, of course, be able to back you up in what you say?”

“Mr. Morell!” Aubrey sprang to his feet with a start of dismay. “I think,” he cried, “all the powers of hell must be against me. Mr. Morell is dead.”

They looked at each other for a moment in silence. A half smile came upon the Colonel’s face, though even he was a little overawed by the despair in the countenance of the young man.

“I don’t know that it matters very much,” he said, “for, after all, Mr. Leigh, your anxiety to get rid of your wife’s companion might have two interpretations. You might have been sincerely desirous to free yourself from a temptation towards another woman, which would have given Mrs. Leigh pain. A man does not sacrifice two hundred a year without a strong motive. And subsequent events make this a far more likely reason than the desire to get rid of an unwelcome inmate.”

“I cannot tell whether my motive was likely or not. I tell you, sir, what it was.”

“Ah, yes—but unfortunately without any corroboration—and the story is very different from the other side. It appears from that that you wished to establish relationship during your poor wife’s life, and

that it was the lady who was moved by pity for you in a moment of weakness—which is much more according to the rule in such matters.”

“It is a lie!” Aubrey cried. “Colonel Kingsward, you are a man—and an honourable man. Can you imagine another man, with the same principles as yourself, guilty of such villainy as that? Can you believe——”

“Mr. Leigh,” said the other, “it is unnecessary to ask me what I can believe; nor can I argue, from what I would do, as to what you would do. That may be good Christianity, you know, but it is not tenable in life. Many men are capable enough of what I say; and, indeed, I do you the credit to believe that you were willing to keep the temptation at a distance—to make a sacrifice in order to ease the mind of your wife. I show a great deal of faith in you when I say that. Another man might say that Mrs. Leigh had exacted it from you as a thing necessary to her peace.”

Aubrey Leigh rose up again, and began to pace the room from one side to the other. He could not keep still in his intolerable impatience and scorn of the net which was tightening about his feet. Anger rose up like a whirlwind in his mind; but to indulge it was to lose for ever the cause which, indeed, was already lost. When he had gained control over himself and his voice, he said, “We had neighbours; we had friends; our life was not lived in a corner unknown to the world. There is my mother; ask them—they all know——”

"Does anyone outside know what goes on between a husband and wife?" said Colonel Kingsward. "Such discussions do not go on before witnesses. If poor Mrs. Leigh——"

"Sir," cried Aubrey, stung beyond bearing, "I will not permit any man to pity my wife."

"It was beyond my province I allow, but one uses the word for those who die young. I don't know why, for if all is true that we profess to believe they certainly have the best of it. Well, if Mrs. Leigh, to speak by the book, had any such burden on her mind, and really felt her happiness to depend on the banishment of that dangerous companion, it is not likely that she would speak of it either to your neighbours or to your mother."

"Why not? My mother was of that mind, though not for that villainous reason; my mother knew, everybody knew—everybody agreed with me in wishing her gone. I appeal to all who knew us, Colonel Kingsward! There is not a friend I have who did not compassionate me for Amy's insensate affection. God forgive me that I should say a word against my poor little girl, but it was an infatuation—as all her friends knew."

"Don't you think we are now getting into the region of the extravagant?" Colonel Kingsward said. "I cannot send out a royal commission to take the evidence of your friends."

Aubrey had to pause again to master himself. If this man, with his contemptuous accents, his cool disdain, were not Bee's father!——but he was so, and, therefore, must not be defied. He answered

after a time in a subdued voice. "Will you allow me—to send one or two of them to tell you what they know. There is Fairfield, with whom you are acquainted already, there is Lord Langtry, there is Vavasour, who was with us constantly——"

"To none of these gentlemen, I presume, would Mrs. Leigh be likely to unfold her most intimate sentiments."

"Two of them have wives," said Aubrey, determined to hold fast, "whom she saw familiarly daily—country neighbours."

"I must repeat, Mr. Leigh, I cannot send out a royal commission to take the evidence of your friends."

"Do you mean that you will not hear any evidence, Colonel Kingsward?—that I am condemned already?—that it does not matter what I have in my favour?"

Colonel Kingsward rose to dismiss his suitor. "I have already said, Mr. Leigh, that I am not your judge. I have no right to condemn you. Your account may be all true; your earnestness and air of sincerity, I allow, in a case in which I was not personally involved, would go far to making me believe it was true. But what then? The matter is this: Will I allow my daughter to marry a man of whom such a question has been raised? I say no: and there I am within my clear rights. You may be able to clear yourself, making out the lady to be a sort of demon in human shape. My friend, who saw her, said she was a very attractive woman. But really this is not the question. I am not a censor of public

morals, and on the whole it is a matter of indifference to me whether you are guiltless or not. The sole thing is that I will not permit my daughter to put her foot where such a scandal has been. I have nothing to do with you but everything with her. And I think now that all has been said."

"That is, you will not hear anything more?"

"Well—if you like to put it so—I prefer not to hear any more."

"Not if Bee's happiness should be involved?"

"My daughter's happiness, I hope, does not depend upon a man whom she has known only for a month. She may think so now. But she will soon know better. That is a question into which I decline to enter with you."

"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love," said Aubrey, with a coarse laugh. He turned as if to go away. "But you do not mean that this is final, Colonel Kingsward——not final? Not for ever? Never to be revised or reconsidered——even if I were as bad as you think me?"

"How needless is all this! I have told you your character does not concern me—and I do not say that you are bad—or think so. I am sorry for you. You have got into a rather dreadful position, Mr. Leigh, for a young man of your age."

"And yet at my age you think I should be cut off for ever from every hope of salvation!"

"Not so; this is all extravagant—ridiculous! And if you will excuse me, I am particularly busy this morning, with a hundred things to do."

Poor Aubrey would have killed with pleasure, knocked down and trampled upon, the immovable man of the world who thus dismissed him; but to be humble, even abject, was his only hope. "I will try, then, to find some moment of leisure another time."

"It is unnecessary, Mr. Leigh. I shall not change my mind; surely you must see that it is better for all parties to give it up at once."

"I shall never give it up."

"Pooh! one nail drives out another. You don't seem to have been a miracle of constancy in your previous relationships. Good morning. I trust to hear soon that you have made as satisfactory a settlement of other claims."

CHAPTER X.

OTHER claims! What other claims? Aubrey Leigh went out of the office in Pall Mall with these words circling through his mind. They seemed to have nothing to do with that which occupied him, which filled every thought. His dazed memory and imagination caught them up as he went forth in the fury of suppressed anger, and the dizzy, stifled sensation of complete failure. He had felt sure, even when he felt least sure, that when it was possible to tell his tale fully, miserable story as it was, the man to whom he humbled himself thus, not being a recluse or a mere formalist—a man of the world—would at least, to some degree, understand and perceive how little real guilt there might be even in such a fault as he had committed. It was not a story which could be repeated in a woman's ears; but a man, who knew more or less what was in man—the momentary lapses, the sudden impulses, the aberrations of intolerable trouble, sorrow, and despair——. Aubrey did not take into account the fact that there are some men to whom such a condition as that into which he himself had fallen in the desolation of his silent house—when death came a second time within the sad year, and his young soul

felt in the first sensation of despair that he could not bear it; that he was a man signalled out by fate, to whom it was vain to struggle, to whom life was a waste and heaven a mockery—was inconceivable. Colonel Kingsward was certainly not a man like that. He would have said to himself that the mother being gone it was only a blessing and advantage that the child should go too, and he would have withdrawn himself decorously to his London lodgings and his club, and his friends would all have said that it was on the whole a good thing for him, and that he was young, and his life still before him. So, indeed, they had said of Aubrey, and so poor Aubrey had proved for himself. Had there not been that terrible moment behind him, that intolerable blackness and midnight of despair, in which any hand that gripped his could lead him till the light of morning burst upon him, and showed him whither in his misery he had been led!

Satisfy other claims? The words blew like a noxious wind through his brain. He laughed to himself softly as he went along. What claims had he to satisfy? He had done all that honour and scorn could do to satisfy the harpy who had dug her claws into his life. Should he try to propitiate her with other gifts? No, no! That would be but to prolong the scandal, to give her a motive for continuance, to make it appear that he was in her power. He was in her power, alas, fatally as it proved, if it should be so that she had made an end of the happiness of his life. She had blighted

the former chapter of that existence, bringing out all that was petty in the poor little bride over whom she had gained so complete an ascendancy, showing her husband Amy's worst side, the aspect of her which he might never have known but for that fatal companion ever near. And now she had ruined him altogether—ruined him as in old stories the Pamelas of the village were ruined by a villain who took advantage of their simplicity. What lovely woman who had stooped to folly could be more ruined than this unhappy young man? He laughed to himself at this horrible travesty of that old familiar eighteenth century tale. This was the *fin de siècle* version of it, he supposed—the version in which it was the designing woman who seized upon the moment of weakness and the man who suffered shipwreck of everything in consequence. There was a horrible sort of ridicule in it which wrought poor Aubrey almost to madness. When the woman is the victim, however sorely she may be to blame for her own disgrace, a sort of pathos and romance is about her, and pity is winged with indignation against the man who is supposed to have taken advantage of her weakness. But when it is a man who is the victim! Then the mildest condemnation he can look for is the coarse laugh of contempt, the inextinguishable ridicule, to which even in fiction it is too great a risk to expose a hero. He was no hero—but an unhappy young man fallen into the most dreadful position in which man could be, shut out of all hope of ever recovering himself, marked by the common scorn—no

ordinary sinner, a man who had profaned his own home, and all the most sacred prejudices of humanity. He had felt all that deeply when he rushed from his house, a man distraught not knowing where he went. And then morning and evening, and the dews and the calm, and the freshness and elasticity inalienable from youth had driven despair and horror away. He had felt it at last impossible that all his life—a life which he desired to live out in duty and kindness, and devotion to God and man—should be spoiled for ever by his momentary yielding to a horrible temptation. He had thought at first that he never could hold up his head again. But gradually the impression had been soothed away, and he had vainly hoped that such a thing might be left behind him and might be heard of no more.

Now he was undeceived—now he was convinced that for what a man does he must answer, not only at the bar of God, where all the secrets of the heart are revealed, but also before men. There are times in which the former judgment is more easy to think of than the latter—for God knows all, everything that is in favour of the culprit, while men only know what is against him. A man with sorrow in his heart for all his short-comings, can endure, upon his knees, that all-embracing gaze of infinite understanding and pity. But to stand before men who misconstrue, mis-see, misapprehend, how different a thing it is—who do not know the end from the beginning, to whom the true balance and perfect poise of justice is almost impossible—who can judge only as they

know, and who can know only the husk and shell of fact, the external aspect of affairs by the side which is visible to them. All these thoughts went through Aubrey's mind as he went listlessly about those familiar streets in their autumnal quiet, no crowd about, nothing to interrupt the progress of the wayfarer. He went across the Green Park, which is brown in the decadence of summer, almost as solitary as if he had been in his own desolate glades at home. London has a soothing effect sometimes on such a still, sunny autumn day, when it seems to rest after the worry and heat and strain of all its frivolity and folly. The soft haze blurs all the outlines, makes the trees too dark and the sky too pale; yet it is sunshine and not fog which wraps the landscape, even that landscape which lies between Pall Mall and Piccadilly. It soothed our young man a little in the despair of his thoughts. Surely, surely at eight-and-twenty everything could not be over. Bee would in a year or two be the mistress of her own actions. She was not a meek girl, to be coerced by her father. She would judge for herself in such a dreadful emergency. After all that had passed, the whole facts of the case would have to be submitted to her, which was a thought that enveloped him as in flames of shame. Yet she would judge for herself, and her judgment would be more like that of heaven than like that of earth. A kind of celestial ray gleamed upon him in this thought.

And as for these other claims—well, if any claim were put forth he would not shrink—would not try

to compromise, would not try to hide his shame under piles of gold. Now he had no motive for concealment, he would face it out and have the question set straight in the eye of day. To be sure, for a man to accuse a woman is against the whole conventional code of honour. To accuse all women is the commonplace of every day; but to put the blame of seduction upon one is what a man dare not do save in the solitude of his chamber—or in such a private inquisition as Aubrey had gone through that day. This is one of the proofs that there is much to be said on both sides, and that it is the unscrupulous of either side who has the most power to humble and to destroy. But the bravado did him good for the moment—let her make her claim, whatever that claim was, and he would meet it in the face of day!

Other ideas came rapidly into Aubrey's mind when he strolled listlessly into his club, and almost ran against the friend in whose house he had first met Colonel Kingsward, and through whom consequently all that had afterwards happened had come about. "Fairfield!" he cried, with a gleam of sudden hope in his eyes.

"Leigh! You here?—I thought you were phillandering on the banks of—some German river or other. Well! and so I hear I have to congratulate you, my boy—and I'm sure I do so with all my heart——"

"You might have done so a week ago, and I should have responded with all mine. But you see

me fallen again on darker days. Fate's against me, it seems, in every way."

"Why, what's the matter?" cried his friend. "I expected to see you triumphant. What has gone wrong? Not settlements already, eh?"

"Settlements! They are free to make what settlements they like so far as I am concerned."

"Kingsward's a very cool hand, Aubrey. You may lose your head if you like, but he always knows what he is about. You are an excellent match——"

"You think so," said poor Aubrey, with a laugh. "Not badly off; a mild, domestic fellow, with no devil in me at all."

"I should not exactly say that. A man is no man without a spice of the devil. Why, what's the matter? Now I look at you, instead of a victorious lover, you have the most miserable hang-dog——"

"Hang-dog, that is it—a rope's end, and all over. Hang it, no! I am not going to give in. Fairfield, I don't want to speak disrespectfully of any woman."

"Is it Mrs. Kingsward who is too young, herself, to think of enacting the part of mother-in-law so soon as this?"

"Mrs. Kingsward is a sort of an angel, Fairfield, if it were not old-fashioned to say so—and, alas, I fear, she will not enact any part long, which is so much the worse for me."

"You don't say so! That pretty creature, with all her pretty ways, and her daughter just the same age as she! Poor Kingsward. Aubrey, if a man

shows a little impatience with your raptures in such circumstances, I don't think you ought to be hard upon him."

"I don't believe he knows what are the circumstances, nor any of them. It is not from that cause, Fairfield. You know Miss Lance, poor Amy's friend——"

Once more he grew hot all over as he named her name, and turned his face from his friend's gaze.

"Remember her! I should think so, and all you had to bear on that point, old man. We have often said, Mary and I, that if ever there was a hero——"

"Fairfield! they have got up a tale that it was I who kept her at Forest-leigh against poor Amy's will, and that my poor wife's life was made miserable by my attentions to that fi——." Fiend he would have said, but he changed it to "woman," which meant to him at that moment the same thing.

Fairfield stared for a moment—was he taking a new idea into his commonplace mind? Then he burst into a loud laugh. "You can call the whole county to bear witness to that," he cried. "Attentions! Well, I suppose you were civil, which was really more than anyone expected from you."

"You know, and everybody knows, what a thorn in the flesh it was. My poor Amy! Without that, there would have been no cloud on our life, and it all arose from her best qualities, her tender heart, her faithfulness——"

A dubious shade came over Fairfield's face. "Yes, no doubt; and Miss Lance's flattery and blandish-

ments. Aubrey, I don't mind saying it now that you are well quit of her—that was a woman to persuade a fellow into anything. I should no more have dared to keep her—especially after—in my house, and to expose myself to her wiles——”

“They never were wiles for me,” said Aubrey, again turning his head away. It was true, true—far more true than the fatal contradiction of it, which lay upon his heart like a stone. “I never came nearer to hating any of God's creatures than that woman. She made my life a burden to me. She took my wife from me——. She—— I needn't get dithyrambic on the subject; you all know.”

“Oh, yes, we all know; but you were too soft-hearted. You should have risked a fit of tears from poor Mrs. Leigh—excuse me for saying so now—and sent her away.”

“I tried it a dozen times. Poor Amy would have broken her heart. She threatened even to go with her. And they say women don't make friendships with each other!”

Fairfield shrugged his shoulders a little. “I suffer myself from my wife's friends,” he said; “there's always some ‘dear Clara’ or other putting the table out of joint, making me search heaven and earth when there's anybody to dinner to find an odd man. But Mary has some——” Sense, he was going to say, but stopped short. Mrs. Fairfield was one of those who had concluded long ago that dear Amy was a little goose, taken sad advantage of by her persistent friend.

"Fairfield," said Aubrey, "you could do me a great service if you would. Colonel Kingsward has just told me that he can't send out a royal commission to examine my friends on this subject. You see him sometimes, I suppose. I know you belong to one of his clubs. Still more, he's at his office all the morning, and you know him well enough to look in upon him there."

"Well?" said Fairfield, dubiously.

"Couldn't you stretch a point for my sake, and go—and tell him the real state of affairs in respect to Miss Lance, and how untrue it is, how ridiculously untrue, that she was kept at Forest-leigh by any will of mine? Why, it was a thing, as you have just said, that all the county knew! An infatuation—and nothing less than the bane of my whole married life."

"Yes, I know—everybody thought so," Mr. Fairfield said. That new idea—was it perhaps germinating faintly in his mind?—no one had thought of any other explanation, but yet——

"If you were only to say so—only as much as that—that all my friends recognised the state of the case."

"I could say that," said Fairfield, with hesitation. "Don't think me unfriendly, Aubrey, but it's a little awkward for a man to interfere in another man's affairs, and it's not only your affairs that I know so well, but you see Kingsward's too——"

"I am aware of that, Fairfield; still, to break off what I believe in my heart would be for his daughter's happiness too——"

"To be sure there's the young lady to be taken into consideration," said Fairfield, dubiously.

It will be as well to carry this incident to its completion at once. Mr. Fairfield at the last allowed himself to be convinced, and he went that afternoon to the club, to which he still belonged by some early military experiences, and where Colonel Kingsward was one of those who ruled supreme. He knew exactly when to find him at the club, where he strolled in after leaving his office, to refresh himself with a cup of tea, or something else in its place. The intercessor went up to the table at which the Colonel sat with the evening paper, and conversed for a little on the topics of the day. After these had been run over, and the prospects of war slightly discussed—for Colonel Kingsward had not much respect for Mr. Fairfield's opinion on that subject—the latter gentleman said abruptly—

"I say, Kingsward, I am very sorry to hear there is some hitch in the marriage which I was so glad to hear of last week."

"Ah, oh! So Leigh has been with you, I presume?" the Colonel replied.

"Yes; and, upon my life, Colonel, there is not a word of truth in any talk you may have heard about that Miss Lance——. We all know quite well the whole business. You should hear Mary on the subject. Of course, he can't say to you, poor fellow, that his first wife was a little queer, and that that woman made her her slave."

"No; it wasn't to be expected that he would tell me that."

"But it's true. She got completely the upper hand of that poor little thing. The husband had no influence. I believe he hated her—like the devil."

"You think so," said the Colonel, with a strange smile, "yet it is a curious thing that he endured her all the same, and also that a wife should insist so in keeping another woman in her husband's constant company—and an attractive woman, as I hear."

"Oh! a devil of a woman," cried Fairfield. "I was telling Aubrey I should no more have ventured to expose myself to her blandishments——. One of those sort of women, you know, that you cannot abide, yet who can turn you round their little finger."

"And what did he say to that?" the Colonel asked, still with that smile.

"Oh, he said she never had any charm for him—and I believe it—for what with poor little Mrs. Leigh's whims and vagaries, and the other's flatteries and adulation and complete empire over her, his life was made a burden to him. You should hear Mary on that subject—none of the ladies could keep their patience."

"Yet it appears Mr. Aubrey Leigh kept his—— until he got tired," said the Colonel. "Believe me, Fairfield, when there is such an unnatural situation as that, there must be more in it than meets the eye."

Fairfield, a good, steady soul, who generally had

his ideas suggested to him, went away very serious from that interview. It was very strange indeed that a woman should prefer her friend to her husband, and make things wretched for him in order to keep her comfortable—it was very curious that with a woman so much superior to Amy in the house, a woman of the kind that turn men's heads, that mild Aubrey Leigh, who was not distinguished for force of character, should have never sought a moment's relief with her from poor Mrs. Leigh's querulousness. Fairfield accelerated his departure by an hour or two in order not to meet Aubrey again before he had poured those strange doubts and suggestions into his own Mary's ears.

CHAPTER XI.

THE party of travellers whose progress had hitherto been like that of a party of pleasure, who had been interested in everything they saw, and hailed every new place with delight, as if that had been the haven of all their hopes, travelled home from Cologne in a very different spirit. For one thing, it could not be concealed that Mrs. Kingsward was ill, which was a thing that she herself and the whole family stoutly, one standing by another, had hitherto been able to deny. She had not gone far, not an hour's journey, when she had to abandon her seat by the window—where it had always been her delight to “see the country,” and point out every village to her children—and lie down upon the temporary couch which Moulsey prepared for her with shawls and cushions along one side of the carriage. She cried out against herself as “self-indulgent” and “lazy,” but she did not resist this arrangement. It effectually took any pleasure that there might have been out of the journey: for Bee, as may be supposed, though she was not melancholy, and would not admit, even to Betty, in the closest confidence, that she was at all afraid of the ultimate issue, was certainly self-absorbed, and glad not to be called upon to

notice the scenery, but allowed to subside into a corner with her own thoughts. Charlie was in the opposite corner, exceedingly glum, and not conversible. Bee would not speak to him or look at him, and even Betty, that little thing, had said, "Oh, Charlie, how could you be so nasty to Aubrey?" for her sole salutation that morning. He was not sure even that his mother, though he had stood on her side and backed her up, was pleased with him for it. She talked to him, it is true, occasionally, and made him do little things for her, but rather in the way in which a mother singles out the pariah of the family, the one who is boycotted for some domestic offence, to show him that all are not against him, than in the tone which is used to a champion and defender. So it was not wonderful that Charlie was glum; but to see him in one corner, biting or trying to bite the few hairs that he called his moustache, with his brows bent down to his chin, and his chin sunk in the collar of his coat—and Bee in another, very different—indeed, her face glorified with dreams, and her eyes full of latent light, ready to flash out at any moment—was not cheerful for the others.

Mrs. Kingsward looked at them from one to another, and at little Betty between busied in a little book, with that baffled feeling which arises in the mind of a delicate woman when the strong individualities and wills of her children become first developed before her, after that time of their youth when all were guided by her decision, and mamma's leave was asked for everything. How fierce, how self-willed,

how determined in his opposition Charlie looked—like his father, not to be moved by anything! And Bee, how possessed by those young hopes of her own, which the mother knew would be of no avail against the fiat gone forth against her! Mrs. Kingsward knew her husband better than her children did. She knew that having taken up his position he would not give in. And Bee, with all that light of resistance in her eyes—Bee as little willing to give in as he! The invalid trembled when she thought of the clash of arms that would resound over her head—of the struggle which would rend her cheerful house in two. She did not at all realise that the cheerful days of that house were numbered—that soon it would be reduced into its elements, as a somewhat clamorous, restless, too energetic brood of children, with a father very self-willed, who hitherto had known nothing of them but as happy and obedient creatures, whose individual determinations concerned games and lessons, and who, so far as the conduct of life was affected, were of no particular account. Mrs. Kingsward was not yet aware that this was the dolorous prospect before her household; she only thought, “How am I to manage them all?” and felt her heart fail before Charlie’s ill humour and *parti pris*, and before the bright defiance in Bee’s eyes. Poor Aubrey, whom she had learned to look upon as one of her own, half a son, and half a brother—poor Aubrey, who had gone so wrong, and yet had so many excuses for him, a victim rather than a seducer—what was happening to Aubrey this fine September morning?

It made her heart sick in her bosom as she thought of all these newly-raised conflicting powers, and she so little able to cope with them. If she did not get strong soon, what would all these children do? Charlie would go back to college, and would be out of it. He had so strong a will, and was so determined to get on, that little harm would happen to him—and besides, he was entirely in accord with his father, which was a great matter. But Bee—Bee! It seemed to Mrs. Kingsward that it was on the cards that Bee might take matters into her own hands, and run away with her lover, if her father would not yield. What else was there for these young creatures? Mrs. Kingsward knew that she herself would have done so in the circumstances had *her* lover insisted; and she knew that he would no more have consented to such a sentence—never, never!—than he had done to anything he disliked all his life. And Bee was like him, though she had never hitherto been anything but an obedient child. Mrs. Kingsward could not help picturing to herself, as she lay there, the elopement—Bee's room found empty in the morning, the note left on the table, the so easy, so certain explanation, which already she felt herself to be reading. And then her husband's wrath, his unalterable verdict on the criminal "never to enter this house again!" Poor mother! She foresaw, as we all do, tortures for herself, which she was never to be called upon to bear.

As for Betty, it was the most tiresome journey in all her little experiences. A long journey was

generally fun to Betty. The scuffle of getting away, of seeing that all the little packets were right, of abusing Moulsey for hiding away the luncheon basket under the rugs and the books in some locked bag, the trouble of securing a compartment, arranging umbrellas and other things in the vacant seats to make believe that every place was full, the watch at every station to prevent the intrusion of strangers, the running from one side to another to see the pretty village or old castle, or the funny people at the country stations and the queer names—the luncheon in the middle of the day, which was as good as a pic-nic—all these things much diverted Betty, who loved the rapid movement through the air, and to feel the wind on her face; but none of these delights were to be had to-day. She was in one of the middle places, between Charlie, so glum and in a temper, and Bee, lost in her own thoughts and without a word to say, and opposite to mamma, who was so much more serious than usual, giving little Betty a smile from time to time, but not able to speak loud enough to be heard through the din of the train. She tried to read her book, but it was not a very interesting book, and it was short too, and evidently would not last out half the journey. Betty was the only member of the party who had a free mind. The commotion of the romance between Bee and Aubrey had been pure amusement to her. It would be a bore if it did not end in a speedy marriage, with all the excitement of the presents, the trousseau, the dresses (especially the bridesmaids'

dresses), the wedding day itself, the increased dignity of Betty as Miss Kingsward, the pleasure of talking of "my married sister," the pleasure of visiting Bee, in her own house, and sharing all her grandeur as a county lady. To miss all this would be a real trial, but Betty had confidence in the fitness of things, and felt it was impossible that she should miss all this. And she was at ease in her little mind, and the present dreariness of this unamusing, unattractive journey hung all the more heavy upon her consciousness now.

They arrived next day, having slept at Brussels to break the journey for Mrs. Kingsward, and the Colonel met them, as in duty bound, at Victoria. He gave Charlie his hand, and allowed Bee and Betty to kiss him, but his whole attention, as was natural, was for his wife.

"You look dreadfully tired," he said, with that half-tone of offence in which a man shows his disappointment at the aspect of an invalid. "You must have been worried on the journey to look so tired."

"Oh, no, I have not been at all worried on the journey—they have all been so good, sparing me every fatigue; but it is a tiresome long way, Edward, you know."

"Yes, of course, I know: but I never saw you look so tired before." He cast a reproachful look round upon the young people, who were all ready to stand on the defensive. "You must have bothered your mother to death," he said. "I am sorry I did

not come out for her myself—undoing all the effect of her cure.”

“Oh, you will see, I shall be all right when I get home,” Mrs. Kingsward said, cheerfully. “As for the children, Edward, they have all been as good as gold.”

“You had better see to the luggage and bring your sisters home in a cab. I can’t let mamma hang about here,” said the Colonel, in his peremptory way. “Moulsey will come with us. I suppose you three have brains enough to manage by yourselves?”

Thus insulting his grown-up children, among whom a flame of indignation lighted up, partially burning away their difficulties between themselves, Colonel Kingsward half carried his wife to the carriage. “I thought at first I should have waited at Kingswarden till you came back. I am glad I changed my mind and came back to Harley Street,” he said.

“Oh, is it to Harley Street we are going?” said Mrs. Kingsward, faintly. “I had rather hoped for the country, Edward.”

“You don’t look much like another twenty miles of a journey,” said her husband.

“Well, perhaps not. I own I shall be glad to be quiet,” the poor lady said. What he wished had always turned out after a moment to be just what his wife wished for all the years of their union. She even meekly accepted the fact that the children—the nursery children, as they were called—the little ones, who were no trouble but only a refreshment and

delight, would have been too much for her that first night. Secretly, she had been looking forward to the touch and sight of her placid smiling baby as the one thing that would do her good—and all those large wet kisses of Johnny and Tommy and Lucy and little Margaret, and the burst of delighted voices at the sight of mamma. “Yes, I believe it would have been too much for me,” she said, with a look aside at Moulsey, who, as on many a previous occasion, would dearly have loved to box her master’s ears. “And I *do* believe it would have been too much for me,” Mrs. Kingsward added, when that confidential attendant put her to bed.

“Perhaps it would, ma’am,” Moulsey said.

“They would have made a noise, bless them—and baby will not go to anyone when he sees me—and altogether I shall be more fit for them, Moulsey, after a good night’s rest——”

“If you get that, you poor dear,” said Moulsey, under her breath. But her mistress did not hear that remark any more than many others which Moulsey made in her own mind, always addressed to that mistress whom she loved. “If he said dying would be good for you, you would say you were sure of it, and that was what you wanted most,” the maid said within herself.

It must not, however, be supposed from this that Colonel Kingsward was not a good husband. He had always been like a lover, though a somewhat peremptory one, to his wife. And without him her young, gay, pleasure-loving ways, her love of life and

amusement might have made her a much less successful personage, and not the example of every virtue that she was. Had Mrs. Kingsward had the upper hand, the family would have been a very different family, and its career probably a very broken, tumultuous, happy-go-lucky career. It was that strong hand which had controlled and guided her, which had been, as people say, the making of Mrs. Kingsward; and though she feared his severity in the present crisis, she yet felt the most unspeakable relief from the baffled, helpless condition in which she had looked at her children, feeling herself all unable to cope with them in the presence of papa.

"I wonder if he thinks we are cabbages," was Bee's indignant exclamation as he turned his back upon them.

"Apparently," said Charlie, coming a little out of his sullenness. "Look here, you girls, get into this omnibus—happily we've got an omnibus—with the little things, while I go to the Custom House to get the luggage through."

"Betty, you get in," said Bee. "I will go with you, Charlie, for I have got mamma's keys."

"Can't you give them to me?" Charlie cast a gloomy look about, thinking that Leigh might perhaps be somewhere awaiting a word, a thought which now for the first time traversed Bee's mind, too.

"Then, Betty, you had better go with him, for he doesn't know half the boxes," she said.

"Oh, you can come yourself if you like," said

Charlie, feeling in that case that this was the safest arrangement after all.

"No, Betty had better go. Betty, you know Moulsey's box and that new basket that mamma brought me before we left the Baths."

"Come along yourself, quick, Bee."

"No, I shall stop in the omnibus."

"When you have made up your minds," cried Betty, who had slipped out of the vehicle at the first word. Betty thought it would be more fun to go through the Custom House than to wait all the time cooped up here.

And Bee had her reward; for Aubrey was there, waiting at a distance till the matter was settled. "I should have risked everything and come, even if the penalty had been a quarrel with Charlie," Aubrey said, "but I must not quarrel with anyone if I can help it. We shall have hard work enough without that."

"You have seen papa?"

"Yes, I have seen him: but I have not done myself much good, I fear," said Aubrey, shaking his head. "Bee, you won't give me up whatever they may say?"

"Give you up? Never, Aubrey, till you give me up!"

"Then all is safe, my darling. However things look now they can't hold out for ever. Lies must be found out, and then—in time—you will be able to act for yourself."

"Do you think papa will stand to it like that, Aubrey?"

Aubrey shook his head. He did not make any reply.

"Tell me. Is it a lie?" she said,

He bent down his head upon her hand, kissing it.

"Not all," he said, in an almost inaudible voice.

"I said that—at Cologne——"

"I did not understand," said Bee. "No; it does not matter to me, Aubrey—not so very much; but if you promised——"

"I never promised—never! My only thought was to escape——"

"Then I can't think what you have done wrong. Aubrey, is she tall, with dark hair, and beautiful dark eyes, and a way of looking at you as if she would look you through and through?"

"Bee!" he said, gripping her fast, as if someone had been about to decoy her away.

"And a mouth," said Bee, "that is very pretty, but looks as if it were cut out of steel? Then, I have seen her. She sat down by me one day in the wood, when I was doing that sketch, and gave me such clever hints, telling me how to finish it, till she made me hate it, don't you know. Is she horribly clever, and a good artist? and like that——"

"Bee! What did that woman say to you?"

"Nothing very much. Asked me about the people at the hotel, and if there were any Leighs—not you, she pretended, but the Leighs of Hurst-leigh, whom she knew. I thought it very strange at the time why she should ask about the Leighs without know-

ing anything—and then I forgot all about it. But to-day it came back to my mind, and I have been thinking of nothing else. Aubrey—she is older than you are?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And she made you promise to marry her?” said Bee, half unconscious yet half conscious of that wile of the cross-examiner, coming back to the point suddenly.

“Never, Bee, never for one moment in my misery! That I should have to make such a confession to you!—but there was no promise nor thought of a promise. I desired nothing—nothing but to escape from her. You don’t doubt my word, Bee?”

“No; I don’t doubt anything you say. But I think she is a dreadful woman to get anybody in her power, Aubrey. My little drawing was for you. It was the place we first met, and she told me how to do it and make it look so much better. I am not very clever at it, you know; and then I hated the very sight of it, and tore it in two. I don’t know why.”

“I understand why. Bee, you will be faithful to me, whatever you are told?”

“Till I die, Aubrey.”

“And never, never believe that for a moment my heart will change from you?”

“Not till I hear it from yourself,” she said, with a woeful smile. The despair in him communicated itself to her, who had not been despairing at all.

“Which will never be—and when you are your own mistress, my darling——”

"Oh, we shan't have to wait for that!" she cried, with a burst of her native energy. "Dear Aubrey, they are coming back; you must go away."

"Till we meet again, darling?"

"Till we meet again!"

CHAPTER XII.

BEE stole into her mother's room as she went upstairs before that first dinner at home which used to be such a joyous meal. How they had all enjoyed it—until now. The ease and space, the going from room to room, the delight in finding everything with which they were familiar, the flowers in the vases (never were any such flowers as those at home!), the incursions of the little ones shouting to each other, "Mamma's come home!" Even the little air of disorder which all these interruptions brought into the orderly house was delightful to the young people. They looked forward as to an ideal life, to beginning all their usual occupations again and doing them all better than ever. "Oh, how nice it is to be at home!" the girls had said to each other. Instead of those hotel rooms, which at their best are never more than hotel rooms, a *genre* not to be mistaken, how delightful was the drawing-room at home, with all its corners—Bee's little table where she muddled at her drawings, mamma's great basket of needlework where everything could be thrown under charitable cover, Betty's stool on which she sat at the feet of her oracle of

the moment, whoever that might be, and all the little duties to be resumed—the evening papers arranged for papa (as if he had not seen enough of them in the day-time in his office!), the flowers to see after, the little notes to write, all the pleasant common-places of the home life. But to-night, for the first time, dinner was a silent meal, hurried over—not much better than a dinner at a railway station, with a sensation in it of being still on the road, of not having yet reached their destination. The drawing-room was in brown holland still, for they were all going on to Kingswarden to-morrow. The house felt formal, uninhabited, as if they had come home to lodgings. All this was bad enough; but the primary trouble of all was the fact that mamma was upstairs—gone to bed before dinner, too tired to sit up. Such a thing had never happened before. However tired she was, she had always so brightened up at the sensation of coming home.

And papa, though kind, was very grave. The happiness of getting his family back did not show in his face and all his actions as it generally did. Colonel Kingsward was very kind as a father, and very tender as a husband; the severity of his character showed little at home. His wife was aware of it, and so were the servants, and Charlie, I think, had begun to suspect what a hand of iron was covered by that velvet glove. But the girls had never had any occasion to fear their father. Bee thought that the additional gravity of his behaviour was owing to herself and her introduction of a new individual

interest into the family; so that, notwithstanding a touch of indignation, with which she felt the difference, she was timid and not without a sense of guilt before her father. Never had she been rebellious or disobedient before; and she was both now, determined not to submit. This made her self-conscious and rather silent; she who was always over-flowing with talk and fun and the story of their travels. Colonel Kingsward did not ask many questions about that. What he did ask was all about "your mother."

"She is not looking so well as when she went away," he said.

"Oh, papa, it's only because she's so tired," cried little Betty. Betty taking upon her to answer papa, to take the responsibility upon her little shoulders! But Bee felt as if she could not say anything.

"Do you really think so?" he said, turning to that confident little speaker—to Betty. As if Betty could know anything about it! But Bee seemed paralysed and could not speak.

She stole, as I have said, into her mother's room on her way upstairs, but she had hardly time to say a word when papa came in to see if Mrs. Kingsward had eaten anything, and how she felt now that she was comfortably established in her own bed. It irritated Bee to feel herself thus deprived of the one little bit of possible expansion, and stirred her spirit. With her cheek to her mother's, she said in her ear, "Mamma, I saw Aubrey at the station," with a thrill of pleasure and defiance in saying that, though secretly, in her father's presence.

"Oh, Bee!" said Mrs. Kingsward, with a faint cry of alarm.

"And he told me," continued Bee, breathless in her whisper, "that papa was firm against us."

"Bee! Bee!"

"And we promised each other we should never, never give up, whatever anyone might say."

"Oh, child, how dare you, how dare you?" Mrs. Kingsward said.

How Bee's heart beat! What an enlivening, inspiring strain of opposition came into her mind, making her cheeks glow and her eyes flame! The whisper was, perhaps, a child's device, perhaps a woman's weakness, but it exhilarated her beyond description to say all this in the very presence of her father. There was a sensation of girlish mischief in it as well as defiance, which relieved all the heavier sentiments that had weighed down her heart.

"What are you saying to your mother, Bee? She must not be disturbed. Run away and let her rest. If we are to go back to Kingswarden to-morrow she must get all the rest that is possible now."

"I was never the one to disturb mamma," said Bee, bestowing another kiss on her mother's cheek.

"Oh, be a good child, Bee!" pleaded Mrs. Kingsward, almost without sound; for by this time the Colonel was hovering over the bed, with a touch of suspicion, wondering what was going on between these two.

"Yes, mamma dear, always," said Bee, aloud.

"What is she promising, Lucy? And what were

you saying to her? Bee should know better at her age than to disturb you with talk."

"Oh, nothing, Edward. She was only giving me a kiss, and I told her to be a good child—as I am always doing; thinking to be heard, you know, for so much speaking," the mother said, with a soft laugh.

"Bee has always been a sufficiently good child. I don't think you need trouble yourself on that point. The thing is for you to get well, my dear, and keep an easy mind. Don't trouble about anything; leave all that to me, and try and think a little about yourself."

"I always do, Edward," she said with a smile.

He shook his head, but agitation had brought a colour to her cheeks, and to persuade one'sself that it is only fatigue that makes a beloved face look pale is so easy at first, before any grave alarm has been roused. Yet, Colonel Kingsward's mind was not an easy one that night. He was *au fond*, a severe man, very rigid as to what he thought his duty, taking life seriously on the whole. His young wife, who loved pleasure, had made him far more a man of society than was natural or indeed pleasing to him; but he had thus got into that current which it is so difficult to get out of without a too stern withdrawal, and his large young family had warmed his heart and dressed his aspect in many smiles and graces which did not belong to him by nature. The mixture of the rigid and the yielding had produced nothing but good effects upon his character till now. But there is no telling what a man is till the first conflict of wills

arises in his own household. Hitherto there had been nothing of the kind. His children had amused him and pleased him and made him proud. Their health, their prettiness, their infantile gaiety and delight in every favour accorded to them had been all so many tributes to his own supreme influence and power. Their very health was a standing compliment to his own health and vigour, from whom they took their excellent constitutions, and to the wonderful care and attention to every law of health which he enforced in his house. Not a drain escaped trapping, not a gas was left undisposed of where Colonel Kingsward was. He had every new suggestion in his nursery that sanitary science could bring up. "And look at the result!" he was in the habit of saying. Not a pale face, not a headache, not an invalid member there. And among the children he was as the sun in his splendour. Every delight rayed out from him. The hour of his coming home was watched for; it was the greatest treat for the little boys to go in the dogcart with Simmons, the groom, to fetch papa from the station, while the others assembled at the door as at a daily celebration to see him arrive. Charlie was now a man grown, but he was a good boy, full of all right impulses, and there had never been any difficulty with him.

Thus Colonel Kingsward had been kept from all knowledge of those contrarieties of nature which appear even in the most favoured regions. He was of opinion that he surrounded his wife with every care, bore everything for her, did not suffer the winds of

heaven to visit her cheek too roughly. And it was true. But he was not at all aware that she saved him anything, or that his joyful omnipotence and security from every fret and all opposition depended upon her more than on anything else in the world. He did not know the little inevitable jars which she smoothed away, the youthful wills growing into individuality which she kept in check. Which was a pity, for the strong man was thus deprived of the graces of precaution, and knew no more than the merest weakling what, as his children grow into men and women, every man has to face and provide against. If Colonel Kingsward was too arbitrary, too trenchant in his measures, too certain that there was no will but his own to be taken into account, the blame must thus be partially laid upon those natural fictions of boundless love and duty and sweet affectionate submission, which grow up in the nursery and reign as long as childhood lasts—until a more potent force of self or will or love, comes in to put the gentle dream to flight.

It was thus that Colonel Kingsward considered the matter about Bee. It had been, of course, necessary to cross Bee two or three times in her life before. It had been necessary, or at least he had thought it necessary, to send her to school; it had been thought expedient to keep her back a year longer than she wished from appearing in the world. These decisions had cost tears and a little struggle, but in a few days Bee had forgotten all about them—or so, at least, her father thought. And a lover—

at nineteen—what was that but another plaything, a novelty, a compliment, such as girls love? How could it mean anything more serious? Why, Bee was a child—a little girl, an ornamental adjunct to her mother, a sort of reflection, not to be detached for a long time from that source of all that was delightful in her. Colonel Kingsward had felt with a delighted surprise that the child and the mother did “throw up” each other when he began to go out with them together, Bee’s young beauty showing what mamma’s had been, and Mrs. Kingsward’s beauty (so much higher and sweeter than any girl’s wild-rose bloom could be) showing what in the after days her child would grow to. To cut these two asunder for a stranger—another man, an intruding personality thrusting himself between the child and her natural allegiance—was oppressive in any shape. At the first word, indeed, and in the amusement furnished him by the letters that had been poured upon him, Colonel Kingsward’s consent had been given almost without thought. Aubrey Leigh was a good match, he had a fine place, a valuable estate, and was well spoken of among men. If Lucy was so absurd as to wish her daughter to marry; if Bee, the silly child, was so foolish as to think of leaving her father’s house for another, that was probably as good a one as she could have chosen. I don’t know if fathers generally feel it a sort of desecration when their young daughters marry. Some fathers do, and some brothers, as if the creature pure by nature from all such thoughts were descending to a lower place, and

becoming such an one as themselves. Colonel Kingsward was not, perhaps, visionary enough for such a view, yet he was slightly shocked in his sentiment about the perfection of his own house by this idea on his child's part of leaving it for another. However, it was true he had a very large family, and to provide so well for one of them at the very outset of her career was a thing which was not to be despised.

But when the second chapter of this romance, all so simple, so natural in its first phase, opened out, and there appeared a dark passage behind—a woman wronged who had a claim upon the man, a story, a scandal—whether it were true or untrue!—Colonel Kingsward, in his knowledge of the world, knew that it did not so much matter whether a story was true or untrue. It stuck, anyhow; and years, generations after, when, if false, it had been contradicted and exploded, and acknowledged to be false, people still would shake their heads and say, “Wasn't there some story?” For this reason he was not very rigid about the facts, part of which, at least, the culprit admitted. There was a woman and there was a story, and all the explanations in the world could not do away with these. What did it matter about the man? He, Colonel Kingsward, was not Aubrey Leigh's keeper. And as for Bee, there would be some tears, no doubt, as when she was sent to school—a little passion of disappointment, as when she was kept back for a whole year, from seventeen to eighteen, in her “coming out”—but the tears and

the passion once over, things would go on the same as before. The little girl would go back to her place, and all would be well.

This was the man's delusion, and perhaps it was a natural one, and he was conscious of wishing to do the best thing for her, of saving her from the after tortures which a wife has to endure whose husband has proclivities towards strange women, and capabilities of being "led away." That was a risk that he could understand much better than she could, at her age. The fellow might be proud of her, small blame to him—he might strive to escape from disgraceful entanglements by such an exceptionable connection as that of Colonel Kingsward, of Kingswarden, Harley Street, and the Intelligence Department; he might be very much in earnest and all that. He did not altogether blame the man; indeed, he was willing enough to allow that he was not a bad fellow, and that he was popular among his friends.

But these were not enough in the case of a girl like Bee. And it was certainly for her good that her father was acting. She had known the man a month, what could he be to her in so short a time? This is the most natural of questions, constantly asked, and never finding any sufficient answer. Why should a girl in three or four weeks be so changed in all her thoughts as to be ready to give up her father's house, the place in which she has all her associations, the company in which she has been so happy, and go away to the end of the world, perhaps, with a man whom she has known only for a month? It

is the commonest thing in the world, but also the most mysterious, and Colonel Kingsward refused to believe in it, as so many other fathers have done. Bee would cry, and her mother would console her. She would fly into a childish passion, and struggle against her fate—for a few days. She would swear that she would never, never give up that new play-thing, and the joy of parading it before the other girls, who perhaps had not such toys to play with—but all that nonsense would give way in a little to firm guidance and considerate care, and the fresh course of amusement and pleasure which the winter would bring.

The winter is by no means barren to those who spend it habitually in town. It has many distractions. There is the theatre, there are Christmas gatherings without number, there are new dresses also to be got for the same, perhaps a pretty new bonnet or two thrown in by a penitent father, very sorry even in his own interests to give his little girl pain. If all these pleasant things could not make up for the loss of a man—of doubtful character, too—whom she had only known for a month, Colonel Kingsward felt that it would be a strange thing indeed, and altogether beyond his power to explain.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was not possible, however, to remove Mrs. Kingsward to Kingswarden next day. She was too much fatigued even to leave her bed, and the doctor who came to see her, her own familiar doctor who had sent her to Germany to the celebrated bath, looked a little grave when he saw the condition in which she had come home. "No fatigue, no excitement," was what he enjoined. She was to have nothing to excite, nothing to disturb her—to go to the country? Oh, yes, but not for some days. To see the children? Certainly, the children could not be kept from their mother; but all in moderation, with great judgment, not too long at a time, not too often. And above all she must not be worried. Nothing must be done, nothing said to cross or vex her. When he heard from the Colonel a very brief and studiously subdued version of a little family business which had disturbed her—"I need not keep any secrets from you, doctor. The fact is that someone wanted to marry my girl Bee, and that I made some discoveries about him which obliged me to withdraw my consent." The doctor formed his lips into a whistle, to which he did not give vent. "That accounts for it," he said.

"That accounts for—what?" cried Colonel Kingsward, not without irritation.

"For the state in which I find her. And mind my words, Kingsward, you'd better let your girl marry anybody that isn't a blackguard than risk that sort of shock with your wife. Never forget that her life——I mean to say that she's very delicate. Don't let her be worried——stretch a point——have things done as she wishes. You will find it pay best in the end."

"For once you are talking nonsense, my dear fellow," said Colonel Kingsward; "my wife is not a woman who has ever been set upon having her own way."

"Let her have it this time," said the doctor, "and you'll never repent it. If she wants Bee to marry, let her marry. Bee is a dear little thing, but her mother, Kingsward, her mother—is of far more consequence to you than even she——"

"That is a matter of course," said Colonel Kingsward. "Lucy is of more importance to me than all the world beside; but neither must I neglect the interests of my child."

"Oh, bother the child," cried the doctor, "let her have her lover; the mother is what you must think of now."

"You seem tremendously in earnest, Southwood."

"So I am——tremendously in earnest. And don't you work your mind on the subject, but do what I say."

"Do you mean to say that my wife is in a——state of danger?"

"I mean that she must be kept from worry——she

must not be contradicted—things must not be allowed to go contrary to her wishes. Poor little Bee! I don't say you are to let her marry a blackguard. But don't worry her mother about it—that is the chief thing I've got to say."

"No, I shan't worry her mother about it," said the Colonel, shutting his mouth closely as if he were locking it up. When Dr. Southwood was gone, however, he stopped the two girls who were lingering about to know the doctor's opinion, and detaching Betty's arm from about Bee's waist drew his eldest daughter into his study and shut the door. "I want to speak to you, Bee," he said.

"Yes, papa." In this call to her alone to receive some communication, Bee, as may be imagined, jumped to a conclusion quite different from what her father intended, and almost for the moment forgot mamma.

"The doctor tells me that above everything your mother must be kept from worry. Do you understand? In the circumstances it is extremely important that you should know this."

"Papa," she cried, half in indignation half in disappointment, "do you think that I would worry her—in any circumstances?"

"I think that girls of your age often think that no affairs are so important as your own, and it is very likely that you may be of that opinion, and I wish you to know what the doctor says."

"Is mamma—very ill?" Bee asked, bewildered.

"He does not say so—only that she is not to be

fretted or contradicted, or disturbed about anything. I feel it necessary to warn you, Bee."

"Why me above the rest?" she cried. "Am I likely to be the one to worry mamma?"

"The others have no particular affairs of their own to worry her with. There must be no private talks, no discussions, no endeavours to get her upon what you may suppose to be your side."

Bee gave her father a glance of fire, but she felt that a little prudence was necessary, and kept the tumult of feeling which was within her as much as possible in her own breast. "I have always talked to mamma of everything that was in my mind," she said, piteously. "I don't know how I am to stop. She would wonder so if I stopped talking; and how can I talk to her except of things that are in my mind."

"You must learn," said the Colonel, "to think of her more than of yourself." He did not at all mean to prescribe to her a course of conduct more elevated than that he meant to pursue himself, but then it was only in action that he meant to carry out his purposes, he was not afraid of committing himself in speech.

Bee looked at him again with a gaze that asked a great many questions, but she only answered, "I will try my very best, papa."

"If you do, I am sure you will succeed, my dear," he said, in a gentler tone.

"Is that all?" she asked, hesitating.

"That is all I want with you just now."

Bee turned away towards the door, and then she paused and made a step back.

"Papa!"

"Yes, Bee."

"Would you mind telling me—I will not say a word to her—but oh, please tell me—"

"What is it?" said the Colonel. He went to his writing-table, and sitting down began to turn over his papers. His tone was slightly impatient, his eyebrows slightly raised, as if in surprise.

"Papa, you must know what it is. I know that you have seen—Mr. Leigh!"

"How do you know anything about it? What have you to do with whom I have seen? Run away. I do not mean to enter into any explanations on this subject with you."

"Then with whom will you enter into explanations? You cannot speak to mamma; she must not be worried. Papa, I am not a little girl now, to be told to run away."

"You seem to be determined not to lose a moment in telling me so."

"I should not have told you so," said Bee, looking at him over the high back of his writing-table, "if you had not told me I was not to talk to mamma."

He looked up at her, and their eyes met; both of them keenly, fiercely blue, lit up with fires of combat. It is often imagined that blue eyes are the softest eyes—but not by those who are acquainted with the kind which belonged to the Kingswards, which might have been called sapphires, if sapphires

ever flash and cut the air as diamonds do. They were not either so dark as sapphires—they were like nothing but themselves, two pairs of blue eyes that might have been made to order, so like were they to each other, and both blazing across that table as if they would have set the house on fire.

“That’s an excellent point,” he said. “I can’t deny it. What made you so terrifically clever all at once?”

There is nothing more stinging than to be called clever in the midst of a discussion. Bee’s eyes seemed to set fire to her face, at least, which flashed crimson upon her father’s startled sight.

“When one has someone else to think of, someone’s interests to take care of——”

“Which are your own interests—and vastly more important than anything which concerns your father and mother.”

“I never said so—nor thought so, papa—but if they are different from yours, that’s no reason,” said Bee, bold in words but faltering in manner, “is it, why I should not think of them, if, as you say, they’re my own interests, papa?”

“You are very bold, Bee.”

“What am I to do if I have no one to speak for me? Papa, Aubrey——”

“I forbid you to speak with such familiarity of a man whom you have nothing to do with, and whom you scarcely know.”

“Papa, Aubrey——” cried Bee, with astonishment. Colonel Kingsward jumped up from his table in

a fury of impatience. "How dare you come and besiege me here in my own room with your Aubrey?—a man whom you have not known a month; a stranger to the family."

"Papa, you must let me speak. You allowed me to be engaged to him. If you had said 'no' at first, there might, perhaps, have been some reason in it."

"Perhaps—some reason!" he repeated, with an angry laugh.

"Yes, for even then it was not your own happiness that was in question. It was I, after all, that was to marry him."

"And you think that is a reason for defying me?"

"It is always said to be a reason—not for defying anybody—but for standing up for what you call my own interests, papa—when they are somebody else's interests as well. You said we might be engaged—and we were. And how can I let anyone, even you, say he is a stranger? He is my *fiancé*. He is betrothed to me. We belong to each other. Whatever anyone may say, that is the fact," cried Bee, very rapidly, to get it all out before she was interrupted.

"It is not at all a cheerful or pleasant fact—if it changes my little Bee, whom I thought I knew, to this flushed and brazen woman, fighting for her——. Go, child, and don't make an exhibition of yourself. Your mother's daughter! It is not credible—to assault me, your father, in my own room, for the sake of——"

"Papa! don't you remember that it is said in the Bible you are not to provoke your children to wrath? Mamma would have stood up for you, I suppose, when she was engaged to you. I may be flushed," cried Bee, putting her hands to her blazing cheeks, "how could I help it? Forced to talk to you, to ask you—on a subject that gives you a right to speak to me, your own child, like that——"

"I am glad you think I have a right to speak as the circumstances demand to my own child," said the Colonel, cooling down; "but why you should be forced, as you say, to take up such an unbecoming and unwomanly position is beyond my guessing."

"It is because I have no longer mamma to speak for me," Bee said.

The creature was not without skill. Now she came back to the point that was not to be gainsaid.

"We have had quite enough of this," Colonel Kingsward replied. "Your mother, as you are quite aware, never set up her will against mine. She was aware, if you are not, that I knew the world better than she did, and was more competent to decide. Your mother would never have stood up to me as you have done."

"It would have been better, perhaps, sometimes, if she had," cried Bee, carried away by the tide of her excitement. Colonel Kingsward was so astounded that he had scarcely power to be angry. He gazed at his excited child with a surprise that was beyond words.

"Oh, papa, papa! Forgive me! I never meant that; it came out before I was aware."

"The thought must have been there or it could not have come out," he said.

"Oh, no; there was no thought there. It may be so with you, but not with us, papa. Words come into our mouths. We don't think them; we don't mean to say—they only seem to—hook on to—something that went before; and then they come out with a crash. Oh, forgive me, forgive me, papa!"

"I suppose," he said, with a half laugh, "that may be taken as a woman's exposition of her own style of argument."

"Don't call me a woman," she said, with her soft small voice, aggrieved and wounded, drawing closer to him. "Oh, papa! I am only your little girl after all."

"A naughty little girl," he said, shaking his head.

"And without mamma to speak for me," added Bee.

The Colonel laughed aloud. "You wily little natural lawyer!" he said; but immediately became very grave, for underneath this burst of half angry amusement Bee had given him a shock she did not know of. All unaware of the edge of the weapons which she used with a certain instinctive deftness, it did not occur to her that these words of hers might penetrate not only deeper than she thought, but far deeper than her own thoughts had ever gone. His wife's worn face seemed suddenly to appear before Colonel Kingsward's eyes in a light which he had never seen before, and the argument which this

child used so keenly, yet so ignorantly, pierced him like a knife. "Without mamma to speak for me!" These words sounded very simple to Bee, a mischievous expedient to trap him in the snare he had laid for her. But if the time should ever come when they should be true! The Colonel was struck down by that arrow flown at a venture. He went back to his table subdued, and sat down there. "That will do," he said, "that will do. Now run away and leave me to my work, Bee."

She came up to him and gave him a timid kiss, which the Colonel accepted quietly in the softening of that thought. She roamed about the table a little, flicking off an imperceptible speck of dust with her handkerchief, arranging some books upon the upper shelf of his bureau, sometimes looking at him over that row of books, sometimes lingering behind him as if doing something there. He did not interfere with her movements for a few minutes, in the *attendant* of his thoughts. Without a mother to speak for her! Poor little girl, if that should ever be so! Poor little children unconscious in their nursery crying for mamma; and, oh, worse than all, himself without his Lucy, who had made all the world sweet to him! He was a masterful man, who would stand to his arms in any circumstances, who would not give in even if his heart was broken; but what a strange, dull, gloomy world it would be to him if the children had no mother to speak for them! He made a sudden effort to shake off that thought, and the first thing that recalled him to himself was to

hear Bee, having no other mischief, he supposed, to turn her hand to, heaping coals upon the little bit of fire which had been lighted for cheerfulness only."

"Bee," he cried, "are you still there? What are you doing? The room is like an oven already, and you are making up a sort of Christmas fire."

"Oh, I am so sorry—I forgot," cried Bee, putting down the shovel hastily. "I thought it wanted mending—for you always like a good fire."

"Not in September," he said, "and such weather; the finest we have had since July. Come, cease this fluttering about—you disturb me—and I have a hundred things to do."

"Yes, papa." Bee's little figure stole from behind him in the meekest way. She stopped in her progress towards the door to give a touch to the flowers on a side table; and then she went slowly on, going out. She had got her hand upon the handle of the door, and Colonel Kingsward thanked heaven he had got rid of her for the moment, when she turned round, eyeing him closely again though keeping by that means of escape. "Papa," she said, softly, "after all the talk we have been having—you perhaps don't remember that—you have never—answered my question yet."

"What question?" he said sharply.

Bee put her hands together like a child, she looked at him beseechingly, coaxingly, like that child returning to its point, and then she said still more softly, "About Aubrey, dear papa!"

CHAPTER XIV.

I WILL not attempt to follow in detail the course of that autumn. It was a fine season, and Mrs. Kingsward was taken to her home in the country and recovered much of her lost health in the serene ending of the month and the bright days of October, which was a model October—everything that month ought to be. The trees had scarcely begun to take any autumnal colouring upon them when they reached Kingswarden—a house which stood among the Surrey hills; an old house placed not as modern houses are, pitched upon hillsides, or at points where there is “a view.” The old Kingswards had been moved by no such ridiculous modern sentiments. They had planted their mansion in a sheltered spot, where it would be safe from the winds that range over the country and all the moorland heights. The gates opened upon a wild country road with an extravagant breadth of green pathway and grassy bank on either side—enough to have made a farmer swear, but very pleasant to the eye and delightful to a horse’s feet, as well as to the pedestrians, whether they were tramps or tourists, who walked or rode on bicycles—the latter class only—from London to Portsmouth. The house was old, red, and straggling, covered with multitudes of creepers. Sheets of purple clematis—the Jackmanni, if anybody wishes to know;

intolerable name for such a royal garment of blossom—covered half-a-dozen corners, hanging down in great brilliant wreaths over old ivy and straggling Virginia creeper and the strong stalks of the climbing roses, which still bore here and there a flower. Other sheets of other flowers threw themselves about in other places as if at their own sweet will, especially the wild exuberance of the Traveller's Joy; though I need not say this wildness was under the careful eye of the gardener, who would not let it go too far. I cannot attempt to tell how many other pleasant and fragrant and flowery things there were which insisted on growing in that luxurious place, even to the fastidious Highland creeper, which in that autumn season was the most gay, luxuriant, and delightful of all. The flowers abounded like the children, not to be checked, as healthy and as brilliant, in the fine, peaty soil and pure air. The scent of the mignonette, which in this late season straggled anywhere, seemed to fill half the country round. The borders were crowned with those autumn flowers which make up as well as they can for their want of sweetness by lavish wealth of colour—the glowing single dahliahs, which this generation has had the good sense to re-capture from Nature after the quilled and rosetted artificial things which the gardeners had manufactured out of them, and the fine scarlet and blue of the salvias, and the glory of all those golden tribes of the daisy kind that now make our borders bright, instead of the old sturdy red geranium, which once sufficed for all the supplies of autumn, an

honest servant but a poor lord. I prefer the sweetness of the Spring, when every flower has a soul in it, and breathes it all about in the air, that is full of hope. But as it cannot always be Spring, that triumph of bright hues is something to mask the face of winter with until the time when the tortured and fantastic chrysanthemum reigns alone.

This was the sort of garden they had at Kingswarden; not shut off in a place by itself, but bordering all the lawns which were of the velvet it takes centuries to perfect. The immediate grounds sloped a little to the south, and beyond them was a very extensive, if somewhat flat prospect, ending on the horizon in certain mild blue shadows which were believed to be hills. There was not much that could be called a park at Kingswarden. The few farms which Colonel Kingsward possessed pressed his little circle of trees rather close; but as long as the farms were let the family felt they could bear this. It gave them a comfortable feeling of modest natural wealth and company; the yeomen keeping the squire warm, they in their farmsteadings, he in the hall.

And the autumn went on in its natural course, gaining colour as it began to lose its greenness and the days their warmth. The fruit got all gathered in after the corn, the apple trees that had been such a sight, every bough bent down with its balls of russet or gold, looked shabby and worn, their season done, the hedges ran over with their harvest, every kind of wild berry and feathery seed-pod, wild elderberries, hips and haws, the

dangerous unwholesome fruit of the nightshade, the triumphant wreaths of bryony of every colour, green, crimson, and purple. The robins began to appear about Kingswarden, hopping about the lawns, and coming very near the dining-room windows after breakfast, when the little tribe of the nursery children had their accustomed half-hour with mamma, and delighted in nothing so much as to crumble the bread upon the terrace and tempt the redbreasts nearer and nearer. When, quite satisfied and comforted about his wife's looks, Colonel Kingsward went off to the shooting, this little flock of children trailed after mamma wherever she went, a little blooming troop. By this time Charlie had gone back to Oxford, and the little ones liked to have the run of the lawns outside and the sitting-rooms within, with nothing more alarming than Betty to keep them in order. It is to be feared that the relaxation of discipline which occurred when papa was absent was delightful to all those little people, and neither was Mrs. Kingsward sorry now and then to feel herself at full ease—with no necessity anywhere of further restraint than her own softened perceptions of family decorum required. It was a moment in which, if that could be said, she was self-indulgent—sometimes not getting up at her usual hour, but taking her breakfast in her room, with clusters of little boys and girls all over her bed, and over the carpet, sharing every morsel, climbing over her in their play. And when she went out to drive she had the carriage full of them; and when she took

her stroll about the grounds they were all about, shouting and racing, nobody suggesting that it would be "too much for her," or sending them off because they disturbed mamma. She was disturbed to her heart's content while the Colonel was away. She said, "You know this is very nice for a time, but it would not do always," to her elder daughter: but I think that she saw no necessity, except in the return of her husband, why it should not do, and she enjoyed herself singing to them, dancing (a very little) with them, playing for them as only the mother of a large family ever can play, that simple dance music which is punctuated and kept in perfect time by her heart as much as by her ear. For myself, I know the very touch upon the piano of a woman who is the orchestra of the children, who makes their little feet twinkle to the music. There is no band equal to it for harmony, and precision, and go. They enjoyed the freedom of having no one to say, "Hush, don't make such a noise in the house," of the absence of all the disturbable people, "the gentlemen," as the servants plainly said, "being away" more, Mrs. Kingsward sometimes thought, with a faint twinge of conscience, than it was right they should enjoy anything in the absence of papa. Charlie was quite as bad as papa, and declared that they made his head ache, and that no fellow could work with such a row going on; it made the little carnival all the more joyous that he was out of the way.

Bee had spent the six weeks since their return

in a sort of splendour of girlish superiority and elation, of which her mother had not been unobservant, though nothing had been said between them. I am not sure that Bee did not enjoy the situation more than if Aubrey had been at Kingswarden wooing her all day long, playing tennis with her, riding with her—in every way appearing as her accepted lover. Circumstances had saved her from this mere vulgarity of beatitude, and she felt that in the very uncertainty of their correspondence, which was private—almost secret, and yet not clandestine—there was a wonderful charm, a romance and tinge of the unhappy and desperate, while yet everything within herself was happy and triumphant. It had never been said, neither by the Colonel nor by his wife (who had said nothing at all), that Bee was not to write letters to Aubrey nor to receive letters from him. I cannot imagine how Colonel Kingsward, in bidding her understand that all was over between Aubrey and herself, did not make a condition of this. But probably he thought her too young and simple to maintain any such correspondence, and her lover too little determined, too persuadeable, to begin it. When Bee had received her lover's first letter it had been under her father's very eyes. It had come at breakfast between two girl-epistles, and Colonel Kingsward would not have been guilty of the pettiness of looking at his daughter's correspondence for any inducement yet before him. She had the tremendous thrill and excitement of reading it in his very sight, which she did not hesitate to do, for the

sake of the bravado, feeling her ears tingle and the blood coursing in her veins, never imagining that he would not observe, and setting her young slight strength like a rock in momentary expectation of a question on the subject. But no question came. Colonel Kingsward was looking at the papers, and at the few letters which came to him at his house. The greater part of his correspondence went to the office. He took it very quietly, and he never remarked Bee at all, which was little less than a miracle, she thought. And it was very well for her that this was one of the mornings on which mamma did not come downstairs.

This immense excitement was a little too strong for ordinary use, and Bee so arranged it afterwards that her letters came by a later post, when she could read them by herself in her room. The servants knew perfectly well of this arrangement—the butler who opened the post bag at Kingswarden, and the maid who carried Miss Bee's letters upstairs—but neither father nor mother thought of it. That is, I will not answer for Mrs. Kingsward. She perhaps had her suspicions; but, if her husband did not forbid correspondence, she said to herself that it was not her business to do so. It seemed to her that nothing else could keep Bee so bright. Her disappointment, the shock of the severance, must have affected her otherwise than appeared if she had not been buoyed up by some such expedient. As for the Colonel, he thought nothing about it. He thought that, as for love, properly so called, the thing was

preposterous for a girl of her years, and that the foolish business had been made up of imaginative novelty, and the charm of the position, which had flattered and dazzled the girl. Now that she had returned to all her old associations and occupations, the pretty bubble had floated away into the air. It had not been necessary even to burst it—it had dispersed of itself, as he said to himself he always knew it would. Thus he deceived himself with the easiest mind and did not interfere.

Mrs. Kingsward had come upon her daughter seated out on the lawn under the great walnut tree, reading one of these letters, one morning when she had gone out earlier than usual, on an exceptionally fine day. Bee had thrust it away hastily into her pocket and came forward with burning cheeks when she heard her mother's voice—but it was not till some time later that Mrs. Kingsward spoke. The day had kept up its morning promise. It was one of those warm days that sometimes come in October, breathing the very spirit of that contented season, when all things have come to fruition and the work of the year is done, and its produce garnered into the barns. Now we may sit and rest, is the sentiment of the much toiling earth—all the labour being over, the harvest done, and no immediate need yet to rise again and plough. The world hangs softly swaying in space, the fields are fallow, the labourer rests. The sunshine lay warm upon the velvet grass, the foliage, thinned by one good blast a week ago, gave just shade enough, not too much; the tea-table

was set out upon the lawn—the little horde had gone off shouting and skirmishing through the grounds, Betty at the head of them, supposed captain and controller, virtually ring-leader, which comes to much the same thing. The air so hushed and silent in itself, half drowsy with profound peace, was just touched and made musical by their shouts, and Bee and her mother, with this triumphant sound of a multitude close by, were alone.

“Bee,” Mrs. Kingsward said, “I have long wanted an opportunity to speak to you.”

“Yes, mamma,” she said, looking up with a rush of blood to her heart, feeling that the moment had come. But she would not have been Bee if she had not put a little something of her own into the thick of the crisis. “There were plenty of opportunities—we have been together all day.”

“You know what I mean,” said Mrs. Kingsward. “Bee, I saw you reading a letter this morning.”

“Yes, mamma.”

“Who was it from?”

Bee looked her mother in the face. “I have never made any secret of it,” she said. “I have read them openly before papa—I never would pretend they were anything different. Of course it was from Aubrey, mamma.”

“Oh, Bee!” said her mother. “You have never told me what your father said to you that morning. He told me that it was all over and done with—that he would never listen to another word on the subject.”

"That was what he told me,"

"Oh, Bee, Bee! and yet——"

"Stop a moment, mamma! He never said I was not to write; he never said there was to be no correspondence. Had he said so, I should have, at least, considered what it was best to do."

"Considered what was best! But you were not the judge. I hope you would have obeyed your father, Bee."

"I cannot say, mamma. You must remember that it is my case and not his. I don't know what I should have done. But it was not necessary, for he said nothing about it."

"Bee, my dear child, he may have said nothing; but you know very well that when he said it was entirely broken off he meant what he said."

"Papa is very capable of saying what he means," said Bee. "I did not think it was any business of mine to inquire what might be his secret meaning. Mamma, dear, don't be vexed; but, oh, that would have been too hard! And for Aubrey, too."

"I think much less of Aubrey that he should carry on a clandestine correspondence with a girl like you."

"Clandestine!" cried Bee, with blazing eyes. "No more clandestine than your letters that come by the post with your own name upon them. If Aubrey did not scorn anything that is clandestine, I should. There is nothing like that between him and me."

"I never supposed you would be guilty of any

artifice, Bee; but you are going completely against your father—making a fool of him, indeed—making it all ridiculous—when you carry on a correspondence, as if you were engaged, after he has broken everything off.”

“I am engaged,” said Bee, very low.

“What do you say? Bee, this is out of the question. I shall have to tell your father when he comes back. Oh! child, child, how you turn this delightful time into trouble. I shall be obliged to tell your father when he comes back.”

“Perhaps it will be your duty, mamma,” said Bee, the colour going out of her face; “and then I shall have to consider what is mine,” she said.

“Oh, Bee, Bee! Oh! how hard you make it for me. Oh! how I wish you had never seen him, nor heard of him,” Mrs. Kingsward cried.

CHAPTER XV.

THIS communication made a little breach between Bee and her mother and planted a thorn in Mrs. Kingsward’s breast. She had been getting on so well; the quiet (which meant the riot of the seven nursery children and all their troublesome ways) had been doing her so much good, and the absence of every care save that Johnny should not take cold, and Lucy eat enough dinner—that it was hard upon her thus to be brought back in a moment to another and a more pressing kind of care. How-

ever, after an hour or two's estrangement from Bee, which ended in a fuller expansion than ever of sympathy between them—and a morning or two in which Mrs. Kingsward remembered as soon as she awoke that it would be her duty to tell her husband and break up the pleasant peace and harmony of the household—the sweetness of that *dolce far niente* swept over her again and obliterated or at least blurred the outline of all such troublous thoughts. Colonel Kingsward sent a hasty telegram to say that he was going on somewhere else for another ten days' shooting, and that, though she exclaimed at first with a countenance of dismay, "Oh, children, papa is not coming home for another week!" in reality gave a pang of relief to her mind. Gliding into her being, she scarcely knew how, was an inclination to take every day as it came without thinking of to-morrow—which was perfectly natural, no doubt, and yet was an unconscious realisation of the fact, which as yet she had never put into words, nor had suggested to her, that those gentle days were numbered. Her husband's delay was in one way like a reprieve to her. She had, like all simple natures, a vague faith in accident, in something that might turn up—"perhaps the world may end to-night"—something at least might happen in another ten days to make it unnecessary for her to disturb the existing state of affairs and throw new trouble into the house. She did not waver at first as to her duty, though nothing in the world could be more painful; and Bee did not say a word to change her

mother's resolution. Bee had always been aware that as soon as it was known the matter must come to another crisis—and the scorn with which she regarded the idea of doing anything clandestine prevented her even from asking that her secret should be kept. It was not in her mind but in her mother's that those faint doubtings at last arose—those half entertained thoughts that a letter or two could do no harm; that the correspondence would drop of itself when it was seen between the two that there was no hope in it; and that almost anything would be better than a storm of domestic dispeace and the open rebellion in which Mrs. Kingsward felt with a shudder Bee would place herself. How are you to break the will of a girl who will not be convinced, who says it is not your, but her affair?

No doubt that was true enough. It was Bee, not Colonel Kingsward, whose happiness was concerned. According to all the canons of poetry and literature in general, which in such matters permeate theoretically the general mind when there is no strong personal instinct to crush them, Bee had right on her side—and her mother's instinct was all on the side of poetry and romance and Bee. She had not the courage to cut short that correspondence, not clandestine though unrevealed, which kept the girl's heart alive, and was not without attractions to the mother also, into whose ear it might be whispered now and then (with always a faint protest on her part) that Aubrey had better hopes, that he had a powerful friend who was going to speak for him. If they

really meant to be faithful to each other—and there was no doubt that was what they meant—they must win the day in the end; and what harm would it do in the meantime that they should hear of each other from time to time? Whereas, if she betrayed the secret, there would at once be a dreadful commotion in the house, and Bee would confront her father and tell him with those blazing eyes, so like his, that it was her affair. Mrs. Kingsward knew that her husband would never stoop to the manœuvre of intercepting letters, or keeping a watch upon those that his daughter received; and what can you do to a girl who says that? She shrank more than any words could say from the renewal of the conflict. She had been so thankful to believe that it had passed over and all things settled into peace while she was ill. Now that she was better her heart sank within her at the thought of bringing it all on again, which would also make her ill again she was convinced. Yet, at the same time, if she could not persuade Bee to give it up of herself (of which there was no hope whatever), then she must, it was her duty, inform her husband. But her heart rose a little at that ten days' reprieve. Perhaps the world might end to-night. Something might happen to make it unnecessary in those ten days.

And something did happen, though not in any way what Mrs. Kingsward could have wished.

Colonel Kingsward's return was approaching very near when on one of those bright October afternoons a lady from the neighbourhood—nay, it was the

clergywoman of the parish, the Rector of Kingswarden's wife, the very nearest of all neighbours—came to call. She had just returned from that series of visits which in the autumn is—with all who respect themselves—the natural course of events. Mrs. Chichester was a woman of good connection, of “private means,” and more or less “in society,” so that she carried out this programme quite as if she had been a great lady. She had an air of importance about her, which seemed to shadow forth from her very entrance something that she had to say—an unusual gravity, a look of having to make up her mind to a certain action which was not without difficulty. There passed a glance between Mrs. Kingsward and Bee, in which they said to each other, “What is it this time?” as clearly as words could have said; for, to be sure, they were well acquainted with this lady's ways. She sat for a little, and talked of their respective travels since they had last met; and of the pleasant weeks she had passed at Homburg, where so many pleasant people were always to be met after the London season; and then she lightly touched on the fact that she had come over early in September, and since then had been staying at a number of country places, with the dear Bishop, and at Lady Grandmaison's, and with old Sir Thomas down in Devonshire, and so on.

“Or,” she concluded, with a disproportionate emphasis on that apparently unimportant word, “I should have been to see you long ago.”

There was a significance in this which again made

Mrs. Kingsward and Bee exchange a look—a laughing glance—as of those who had heard the phrase before. When, however, she had asked some questions about Mrs. Kingsward's health, and expressed the proper feeling—sorry to hear she had been so poorly; delighted that she was so much better—Mrs. Chichester departed from her established use and wont. Instead of beginning upon the real object of her visit, after she had taken her cup of tea, with a “Now,” (also very emphatic) “I want to interest you in something I have very much at heart,”—which was generally a subscription, a society, a bazaar, a missionary meeting, or something of the sort—Mrs. Chichester bent forward and said, in a half whisper, “I have something I want very much to talk to you about. Could I speak to you for a moment—alone?”

Bee was much surprised, but took her part with promptitude. “You want to get rid of me,” she said. “I shall go out on to the terrace, mamma, and you can call me from the window when you want me. I shall be sure to hear.”

There was another look between them, always with a laugh in it, as she stepped out of the open window, with a book in her hand, a look which repeated, “What can it be, now?” with the same amusement as at first, but with more surprise. Bee made a circuit round the lawn with her book, one finger shut in it to mark the place; looking at the flowers, as one does who knows every plant individually, and notes each bud that is opening, and which

are about to fall. She calculated within herself how long the dahlias would last, and that the Gloire de Dijon roses must be cut to-morrow, as she pursued her way towards the walnut tree, under which she meant to place herself. But Bee had not been there many minutes before she felt a little shiver creep over her. It was getting rather cold in this late October to sit out of doors, when the sun was already off the garden, and she had, as girls say, "nothing on." She got up again, and made her way round to a garden bench which was set against the wall of the house, at the spot where the sunshine lasted longest. There was still a level ray of ruddy light pouring on that seat, and Bee forgot, or rather never thought, that it was close to the drawing-room window. Her mind was not much exercised about Mrs. Chichester's secret, which probably concerned the mothers and babies of the parish, and which she certainly had no curiosity to hear. Besides, no doubt, the visitor had told by this time all the private details there were to tell. Bee sat down upon the bench, taking no precautions to disguise the sound of her footsteps, and opened her book. She was not an enthusiastic student, though she liked a novel as well as anyone; but her eyes strayed from it to the great width of the horizon in front of her, and the ruddy glory in the west, in which was just about to disappear that last long golden ray of the sun.

Then she heard a low cry—an exclamation, stifled, yet full of horror. Was it mamma? What could the clergywoman be saying to bring from

mamma's lips such a cry? Bee—I cannot blame her—pricked up her ears. Mrs. Kingsward was not strong enough to be disturbed by horrors with which she had nothing to do.

“Oh, I cannot believe it; I cannot believe it!” she said.

“But,” said the other voice, with that emphasis at which Bee had laughed so often, “I can assure you it is true. I saw him myself shaking hands with the woman at the station. I might not have believed Miss Tatham's story, but I saw with my own eyes that it was Mr. Leigh. I had met him at Sir Thomas's the year before—when he was still in deep mourning for his wife, you know.”

Mr. Leigh! So it was something about Aubrey! Then it was Bee's business still more than her mother's, and she listened without any further thought.

“But,” said Mrs. Kingsward, as if taking courage, “you must be mistaken; oh, not about seeing him shake hands with a woman—why shouldn't he shake hands with a woman? He is very friendly with everybody. Perhaps he knew her, and there is nothing to find fault with in that.”

“Now,” said Mrs. Chichester, solemnly, “should I have mentioned it had it been confined to that? I only told you of that as a proof. The thing is that he put in this woman—a common woman, like a servant—into a sleeping carriage—you know what those sleeping carriages cost; a perfect fortune; far too much for any comfort there is in them—in the middle of the night, with her two children. The

woman behaved quite nicely, Miss Tatham says, and looked shocked to be put in with a lady, and blushed all over her face, and told that ridiculous story to account for it. Poor thing! One can only be sorry for her. Probably some poor thing deceived, and thinking she was to be made a lady of. But I know what you must think of the man, Mrs. Kingsward, who could do such a thing on his way from staying with your own family, even if there had been no more in it than that."

"But Mr. Leigh is very kind—kind to everybody—it might have been nothing but charity."

"Charity—in an express train sleeping carriage! Well, I confess I never heard of charity like that. Gentlemen generally know better than to compromise themselves for nothing in that sort of way. They are more afraid of risking themselves in railway carriages and that kind of thing than girls are—much more afraid. And if you remember, Mrs. Kingsward, what kind of reputation Mr. Leigh had in his poor wife's time—keeping that Miss Lance all the time in her very house under her eyes."

"I have always heard that it was Mrs. Leigh who insisted upon keeping Miss Lance——"

"Is it likely?" said Mrs. Chichester. "I ask you, knowing what you do of human nature? And then a thing to happen like this on his very way home—when he had just left you and poor little Bee. Oh, it is shameless, shameless! I could not contain myself when I heard of it. And then it was said that the Colonel had broken off the engagement, and I

thought it would be a comfort to you to know that other things were occurring every day, and that it was the only thing to do."

"It is no comfort to me—and I cannot—I cannot believe it!"

"Dear Mrs. Kingsward, you always take the best view; but if you had seen him, as I did, holding the woman's hand, bending over her with such a look!—I was afraid he would kiss her, there, before everybody. And I, knowing of the engagement, and that he had just left you—before Miss Tatham said a word—I sat and stared, and couldn't believe my eyes. It was the tenth of September, and he had left Bee, hadn't he, the night before?"

"I never remember dates," said Mrs. Kingsward, querulously.

"I do," replied the visitor, "and I took the trouble to find out. At least, I found out by accident, through someone who saw him at the club, and who had just discovered the rights of that story about Miss Lance. Oh, I trust you will not be beguiled by his being a good *parti*, or that sort of thing, to trust dear Bee in such hands! Marriage is always rather a disenchantment; but think what it would be in such a case—a man that can't be trusted to travel between Cologne and London without——"

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" said Mrs. Kingsward; and Bee heard that her mother had melted into tears.

"That is as good as saying you don't believe me, who saw it with my own eyes," said the visitor,

getting up. "Indeed, I didn't mean at all to distress you, for I thought that, as everything was broken off—I thought only if you had any doubts, as one has sometimes after one has settled a thing—that to know he was a man like that, with no respect for anything, who could leave his *fiancée*, and just plunge, plunge—there is no other word for it——"

It was evident that Mrs. Kingsward, reduced to helplessness, here made no effort either to detain her visitor or to contradict her further, or indeed to make any remark. There was a step or two across the room, and then Mrs. Chichester said again—"Good-bye, dear. I am very sorry to have distressed you—but I couldn't leave you in ignorance of such a thing for dear Bee's sake; that is the one thing to be thankful for in the whole matter, that Bee doesn't seem to mind a bit! She looks just as bright and just as nice as if nothing had happened. She can't have cared for him! Only flattered, I suppose, and pleased to have a proposal—as those little things are, poor things. We should all thank heaven on our knees that there's no question of a broken heart in Bee's case——"

She might not have been so sure of that had she seen the figure which came through the window the moment the door had closed upon her—Bee with her blue eyes blazing wildly out of her white face, and strange passion in every line both of features and form.

"What is the meaning of it?" she said, briefly, with dry lips.

"Oh, Bee, you have heard it all!"

"I have heard enough—what does it mean, mamma?"

Mrs. Kingsward roused herself, dried her eyes, and went forward to Bee with outstretched arms; but the girl turned away. "I don't want to be petted. I want to know what—what it means," she said.

"I don't believe it," cried Mrs. Kingsward.

"Give a reason; don't say things to quiet me. Oh, keep your arms away, mamma! Don't pet me as if I wanted that! Why don't you believe it? And if you did believe it—what does it mean—what does it mean?"

CHAPTER XVI.

BEE'S look of scared and horrified misery was something new in Mrs. Kingsward's experience. The girl had not known any trouble. Her father's rejection of her lover and the apparent break between them had been in reality only another feature in the romance. She had almost liked it better so. There had been no time to pine, to feel the pain of separation. It was all the more like a poem, like what every love story should be, that this breaking off should have come.

And now, all at once, without any warning! The worst of it was that Bee had only heard a part of the story, the recapitulation of it. Mrs. Chichester

had given the accused more or less fair play. She had given an imperfect account of the explanation, the story the woman had told—as was almost inevitable to a third party, but she had given it to the best of her ability, not meaning to deceive, willing enough that he should have the benefit of the doubt, or perhaps that the judgment upon him should be all the more hard, because of his attempt to mingle deceit with his sin, and throw dust in the eyes of any possible spectators. This was the way in which it had appeared to herself, but she was not unfair. She told the story which had been told to the astonished lady upon whose solitude the little party had been obtruded in the middle of the night, and who had heard it perhaps even imperfectly at first hand mingled with the jolting and jarring of the train and the murmur of the children. And yet Mrs. Chichester had repeated it honestly.

But Bee had not heard that part of the tale. She had heard only the facts of the case which had presented to her inexperienced young mind the most wild and dreadful picture. Her lover, who had just left her, whom she had promised to stand by till death, suddenly appeared to her in the pale darkness of the midnight with a woman and children hanging on to him—belonging to him, as appeared. Where had he met them? How had he arranged to meet them? When her hand had been in his, when he had been asking from her that pledge till death, had he just been arranging all that—giving them that rendezvous—settling how they were to

meet, and where? A horror and sickness came over poor Bee. It made her head swim and her limbs tremble. To leave her with her pledge in his ears, and to meet, perhaps at the very outset of his journey, the woman with the children—a common sort of woman, like a servant. As if that made any difference! If she had been a duchess it would have been all the same. He must have met her fresh from Bee's presence, with his farewell to the girl whom he had pretended to love still on his lips. She could not think so clearly. Was this picture burnt in upon her mind? She seemed to see the dim, half-lighted carriage, and Aubrey at the door putting the party in. And then at Dover, in the daylight, shaking hands with his companion, bending over her as if he meant to kiss her! These two pictures took possession of Bee's mind completely. And all this just when he had left Bee—between his farewell to her and his interview with her father! If she had heard of the story which the woman had told to the startled Miss Tatham in the dim sleeping carriage, from which, looking out, she had recognised Aubrey Leigh, it might have made a difference. But that story had not been told in Bee's hearing. And Mrs. Kingsward did not know this, but supposed she had heard the whole from beginning to end.

Bee's mother, to tell the truth, after the first shock, was glad of that unconscious eaves-dropping on Bee's part; for how could she have told her? Indeed, the story was too gross, too flagrant to be believed by herself. She felt sure that there must

be some explanation of it other than the vulgar one which was put upon it by these ladies; but she knew very well that the same interpretation would be put upon it by her husband, and many other people to whom Aubrey's innocent interference in such a case would have seemed much less credible than guilt. Guilt is the thing that generally rises first as the explanation of everything, to the mind, both of the man and woman of the world. The impossibility of a man leaving a delicate flower of womanhood like Bee, whose first love he had won, in order to fall back at once into the bonds of a common intrigue, and provide for the comfort of his paramour, who had been waiting for him on the journey, would not prove so great to most people as the impossibility that he, as a stranger, would step out of his way to succour a poor little mother and children whom he had never seen before, and risk thereby a compromising situation.

The latter was the thing which would have seemed unutterably ridiculous and impossible to Colonel Kingsward. A first-class sleeping carriage secured for a mere waif upon his way, whom he had never seen before and never would see again! The fellow might be a fool, but he was not such a fool as that. Had the woman even been old and ugly the Colonel would have laughed and shrugged his shoulders at Aubrey's bad taste; but the woman was pretty and young. A long-standing affair; no doubt; and, of course, it was quite possible, nay likely, that she was being sent, poor creature, to some retreat or

other, where she would be out of the way with her children.

Mrs. Kingsward knew, as if she had heard him say these words, how her husband would speak. And who was she, with not half his experience of the world, to maintain a different opinion? Yet she did so. She thought it was like Aubrey to turn the poor woman's lingering, melancholy journey into a quick and comfortable one, out of pure kindness, without thought of compromising himself any more than of having any recompense for what he did. But she did not know that Bee knew nothing of this explanation of the story. When she found that her child evidently thought nothing of that, but received at once the darker miserable tale into her mind, she was startled, but not perhaps astonished. Bee was young to think the worst of anybody, but at the same time it is by far the commonest way of thinking, and the offence was one against herself, which gives a sharper edge to everything. And then she knew what was going on in Bee's mind chiefly by guesswork, for the girl said little. The colour went out of her face, her eyes sometimes gave a gleam of their old fire, but mostly had a strange set look, as if they were fixed on something not visible to the ordinary spectator. She sat all the evening through and never spoke. This was not so noticeable while the children were still about with their perpetual flow of observations and flood of questions; but when they went off in detachments to bed, and the two elder girls were left alone with their mother, Bee's

silence fell upon the others like a cloud. Betty, who knew nothing, after a few minutes rushed away upstairs to find refuge in the nursery, and then Mrs. Kingsward was left alone, face to face with this silent figure, so unlike Bee, which neither moved nor spoke. She had scarcely the courage to break the dreadful silence, but yet it had to be broken. Poor Mrs. Kingsward's heart began to beat violently against her breast as it had not done since her return home.

"Bee!" she said. "Bee!"

Already the pumping of her heart had taken away her breath.

"Yes, mamma."

"Oh! Bee, what—what are you going to do?"

"To do, mamma?"

"Oh! don't repeat my words after me, but give me some sort of an answer. Betty may be back again in a moment. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" the girl said, in a low voice.

"I can't suppose but that you have been thinking about it—what else could you be thinking of, poor child? For my part, I don't believe it. Do you hear me, Bee?"

"Yes—I heard you say that before, mamma."

"And that is all you think of what I say! My darling, you can't remain like this. The first thing your father will ask will be, 'What has happened?' I cannot bear that you should give up—without a word."

Mrs. Kingsward had disapproved of the correspondence, had felt that it would be incumbent

upon her to tell her husband of it, but yet in this unforeseen emergency she forgot all that.

"Without a word! What words could I say? You don't suppose I could discuss it with him—ask if it was true? If it's true, there isn't a word to say, is there? And if it isn't true it would be an insult to ask him. And so one way or another it is all just done with and over. And I wish you would leave me quiet, mamma."

"Done with and over! Without a word—on a mere story of something that took place on a journey!"

"Oh! leave me quiet, mamma. Do you think I need to be reminded of that journey? As if I did not see it, and the lamps burning, and hear the very wheels!"

"Bee, dear, how can I leave you quiet? Do you mean just to let it break off like that, without a word, without giving him the chance to explain?"

"I thought," said Bee, with a faint satirical smile, for, indeed, her heart was capable of all bitterness, "that it was broken off completely by papa, and all that remained was only—what you called clandestine, mamma."

"I did not call it clandestine. I knew you would do nothing that was dishonourable. And it is true that it was—broken off. But, Bee! Bee! you don't seem to feel the dreadful thing this is. After all that has passed, to let it drop in a moment, without saying a word!"

"I thought it was what I ought to have done, as soon as papa's will was made known."

"Oh! Bee, you will drive me mad. And I have got no breath to speak. So you ought, perhaps—but you have not, when perhaps there was a reason. And now, for a mere chance story, and without giving him—an opportunity—to speak for himself."

Bee raised her face, now crimson as it had before been pale.

"How could I put any questions on such a thing? How could it be discussed between him and me? To think of it is bad enough, but to speak of it—mamma! How do I know, even, what words to say?"

"In that case, every engagement would be at the mercy of any slanderer, if the girl never could bring herself to ask what it meant."

"I am not any girl," cried poor Bee, with a quiver of her lip. "I am just myself. I don't think very much of myself any more than you do, but I can't change myself. Oh, let me alone, let me alone, mamma!"

Mrs. Kingsward was very much excited. Her nostrils grew pinched and dilated in the struggle for breath; her lips were open and panting from the same cause. She was caught in that dreadful contradiction of sentiment and feeling which is worse than any unmingled catastrophe. She had been rent asunder before this by her desire to shield her daughter, yet the sense of her duty to her husband remained, and now it was the correspondence which she seemed to be called upon to defend almost at peril of her life; that actually clandestine, at least

secret correspondence, of which she could not approve, which she was bound to cut short. And yet to cut it short like this was something which she could not bear. She threw aside the work with which she had been struggling and fixed her eyes on Bee, who did not look at her nor see how agitated her expression was.

"If you can do this, I can't," she said. "I will write to him. The other dreadful story may be true, for anything I know. And that, of course, is enough. But this one I don't believe, if an angel from Heaven told it me. He shall at least have the chance of clearing himself!"

"I don't know," said Bee, "what the other dreadful story was. I thought it was only pretending to love—some other woman; and then—pretending to love *me*"—she broke off into a little hoarse laugh. The offence of it was more than Bee could bear. The insult—to suffer (she said to herself) was one thing—but to be insulted! She laughed to think what a fool she had been; how she had been taken in; how she had said—oh, like the veriest credulous fool—"Till death."

"He was not pretending to love you. What went before I know not, but with you he was true."

"One before—and one after," said Bee, rising in an irrepressible rage of indignation. "Oh, mamma, how can we sit quietly and discuss it, as if—as if it were a thing that could be talked about? Am I to come in between—two others—two—— I think it will make me mad," the girl cried, stamping her foot.

"How does a man dare to do that—to insult a girl—who never sought him nor heard of him, wanted nothing of him—till he came and forced himself into her life!"

"Oh! Bee, my darling," cried the mother, going up to her child with outstretched arms.

"Don't touch me, don't touch me, don't pet me; I cannot bear it. Let me stand by myself. I am not a little thing like Lucy to be caught up and kissed till I forget. I don't want to forget. There is nothing that can ever be done to me, if I were to live to an hundred, to put this out of my head."

"Bee, be patient with me for a moment. I have lived longer than you have. What went before could be no offence to you, whatever it was. It might be bad, but it was no offence to you. And this—I don't believe it——"

Bee was far too much self-absorbed to see the labouring breath, the pink spot on each cheek, the panting which made her mother's fine nostrils quiver and kept her lips apart, or that she caught at the back of a chair to support herself as she stood.

"I don't know why—you shouldn't believe it. I don't believe it; I see it, I hear it," cried Bee. "It's like a story—and I thought these things were always stories, things made up to keep up the interest in a book—— I'm the—deceived heroine, the one that's disappointed, don't you know, mamma? We've read all about her dozens of times. But she generally makes a fuss over it," the girl said, with her suffocat-

ing laugh. "I shall make—no fuss—— Mamma! What is the matter, mamma?"

Nothing more was the matter than the doctor could have told Mrs. Kingsward's family long ago—a spasm of the heart. She stumbled backward to the sofa, and flung herself down before consciousness forsook her. Did consciousness forsake her at all? Bee rushing to the bell, making its violent sound peal through the house, then flinging herself at her mother's feet, and calling to her in the helplessness of utter ignorance, "Mamma, mamma!" did not think that she was unconscious. Broken words fell from her in the midst of her gasps for breath, then there was a moment of dread stillness. By this time the room seemed to be full of people—Bee did not know who was there—and then there suddenly appeared out of the mist Moulsey with a glass and teaspoon in her hands.

"Go away, all of you," cried Moulsey, "she'll be better directly—open all the windows and take a fan and fan her, Miss Bee."

The blast of the cold October night air came in like a flood, Bee seemed to come out of a horrible dream in the waft of air brought by the fan which she was herself waving to and fro—and in a little time, as Moulsey said, Mrs. Kingsward was better. The labouring breath which had come back after that awful moment of stillness gradually calmed down and became softer with an occasional long drawn sigh, and then she opened her eyes and said, with a faint smile, "What is it? What is it?" She looked

round her for a moment puzzled—and then she said, “Ah! you are fanning me,” with a smile to Bee, but presently, “How cold it is! I don’t think I want to be fanned, Moulsey.”

“No, ma’am, not now. And White is just a-going to shut all the windows. The fire was a bit too hot, and you know you never can bear it when the room gets too hot.”

“No, I never can bear it,” Mrs. Kingsward said, in a docile tone. She followed the lead of any suggestion given to her. “I must have got faint—with the heat.”

“That was just it,” said Moulsey. “When you have a fire in the drawing-room so early it looks so cheerful you’re apt to pile it too high without thinking—for it ain’t really cold in October, not cold enough to have a fire like that. You want it for cheerfulness, ma’am, more than for heat. A big bit of wood that will make a nice blaze, and very little coal, as is too much for the season, is what your drawing-room fire should be.”

Mrs. Kingsward gradually came to herself during this long speech, which no doubt was what Moulsey intended. But she said she felt a little weak, and that she would keep on the sofa until it was time to go to bed. The agitation she had gone through seemed to have passed from her mind. “Read me a little of that story,” she said, pointing to a book on the table. “We left off last night at a most interesting part. Read me the next chapter, Bee.”

Bee sat down beside her mother’s sofa and opened

the book. It was not a book of a very exciting kind it may be supposed, when it was thus read a chapter at a time, without any one of the party opening it from evening to evening to see how things went on. But as it happened at this point of the story, the heroine had found out that her lover was not so blameless as she thought, and was making up her mind to have nothing to do with him. Bee began to read with an indignation beyond words for both hero and heroine, who were so pale, so colourless, beside her own story. To waste one's time reading stuff like this, while the tide of one's own passion was ten times stronger! She did not think very much of her mother's faint. It was, no doubt, the too large fire, as Moulsey said.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was perhaps a very good thing for Bee at this distracting and distracted moment of her life, that her mother's illness came in to fill up every thought. Her own little fabric of happiness crumbled down about her ears like a house of cards, only as it was far more deeply founded and strongly built, the downfall was with a rumbling that shook the earth and a dust that rose up to the skies. Heaven was blurred out to her by the rising clouds, and all the earth was full of the noise, like an earthquake, of the falling walls. She could not get that sound out of her ears even in Mrs. Kingsward's sick room,

where the quiet was preternatural, and everybody spoke in the lowest tone, and every step was hushed. Even then it went on roaring, the stones and the rafters flying, the storms of dust and ruin blackening the air, so that Bee could not but wonder that nobody saw them, that the atmosphere was not thick and stifling with those *debris* that were continually falling about her own ears. For everything was coming down; not only the idol and the shrine he abode in, but heaven and earth, in which she felt that no truth, no faith, could dwell any longer. Who was there to believe in? Not any man if not Aubrey; not any goodness, any truth, if not his—not anything! For it was without object, without warning, for nothing at all, that he had deserted her, as if it had been of no importance: with the ink not dry on his letter, with her name still upon his lips. A great infidelity, like a great faith, is always something. It is tragic, one of the awful events of life in which there is, or may be, fate; an evil destiny, a terrible chastisement prepared beforehand. In such a case one can at least feel one's self only a great victim, injured by God himself and the laws of the universe, though that was not the common fashion of thought then, as it is now-a-days. But Bee's downfall did not mean so much as that it was not intended by anyone—not even by the chief worker in it. He had meant to hold Bee fast with one hand while he amused himself with the other. Amused himself—oh, heaven! Bee's heart seemed to contract with a speechless spasm of anguish and rage. That she

should be of no more account than that! Played with as if she were nobody—the slight creature of a moment. She, Bee! She, Colonel Kingsward's daughter!

At first the poor girl went on in a mist of self-absorption, through which everything else pierced but dully, wrapped up and hidden in it as in the storm which would have arisen had the house actually fallen about her ears, perceiving her mother through it, and the doctor, and all the accessories of the scene—but dimly, not as if they were real. When, however, there began to penetrate through this strange words, with strange meanings in them: “Danger”—danger to whom?—“Strength failing”—but whose strength?—a dull wonder came in, bringing her back to other thoughts. By-and-by, Bee began to understand a little that it was of her mother of whom these things were being said. Her mother? But it was not her mother's house that had fallen; what did it mean? The doctor talked apart with Moulsey, and Moulsey turned her back, and her shoulders heaved, and her apron seemed to be put to her eyes. Bee in her dream said, half aloud, “Danger?” and both the doctor and Moulsey turned upon her as if they would have killed her. Then she was beckoned out of the room, and found herself standing face to face with that grave yet kindly countenance which she had known all her life, in which she believed as in the greatest authority. She heard his voice speaking to her through all the rumbling and downfall.

"You must be very courageous," it said. "You are the eldest, and till your father comes home——"

What did it matter about her father coming home, or about her being the eldest? What had all these things to do with the earthquake, with the failure of truth, and meaning, and everything in life? She looked at him blankly, wondering if it were possible that he did not hear the sound of the great falling, the rending of the walls, and the tearing of the roof, and the choking dust that filled all earth and heaven.

"My dear Beatrice," he said, for he had known her all his life, "you don't understand me, do you, my poor child?"

Bee shook her head, looking at him wistfully. Could he know anything more about it, she wondered—anything that had still to be said?

He took her hand, and her poor little hand was very cold with emotion and trouble. The good doctor, who knew nothing about any individual cause little Bee could have for agitation, thought he saw that her very being was arrested by a terror which as yet her intelligence had not grasped; something dreadful in the air which she did not understand. He drew her into the dining-room, the door of which stood open, and poured out a little wine for her. "Now, Bee," he said, "no fainting, no weakness. You must prove what is in you now. It is a dreadful trial for you, my dear, but you can do a great deal for your dear mother's sake, as she would for yours."

"I have never said it was a trial," cried Bee, with a gasp. "Why do you speak to me so? Has mamma told you? No one has anything to do with it but me."

He looked at her with great surprise, but the doctor was a man of too much experience not to see that here was something into which it was better not to inquire. He said, very quietly, "You, as the eldest, have no doubt the chief part to play; but the little ones will all depend upon your strength and courage. Your mother does not herself know. She is very ill. It will require all that we can do—to pull her through."

Bee repeated the last words after him with a scared look, but scarcely any understanding in her face—"To pull her—through?"

"Don't you understand me now? Your mother—has been ill for a long time. Your father is aware of it. I suppose he thought you were too young to be told. But now that he is absent, and your brother, I have no alternative. Your mother is in great danger. I have telegraphed for Colonel Kingsward, but in the meantime, Bee—child, don't lose your head! Do you understand me? She may be dying, and you are the only one to stand by her, to give her courage."

Bee did not look as if she had courage for anyone at that dreadful moment. She fell a-trembling from head to foot and fell back against the wall where she was standing. Her eyes grew large, staring at him yet veiled as if they did not see—and she

stammered forth at length, "Mother, mother!" with almost no meaning, in the excess of misery and surprise.

"Yes, your mother; whatever else you may have to think of, she is the first consideration now."

He went on speaking, but Bee did not hear him; everything floated around her in a mist. The scenes at the Bath, the agitations, Mrs. Kingsward's sudden pallors and flushings, her pretence, which they all laughed at, of not being able to walk; her laziness, lying on the sofa, the giddiness when she made that one turn with Charlie, she who had always been so fond of dancing; the hurry of bringing her to Kingswarden when Bee had felt they would have been so much better in London, and her strange, strange new fancy, mutely condemned by Bee, of finding the children too much for her. Half of these things had been silently remarked and disapproved of by the daughters. Mamma getting so idle—self-indulgent almost, so unlike herself! Had they not been too busily engaged in their own affairs, Bee and Betty would both have been angry with mamma. All these things seem to float about Bee in a mist while she leaned against the wall and the doctor stood opposite to her talking. It was only perhaps about a minute after all, but she saw waving round her, passing before her eyes, one scene melting into another, or rather all visible at once, innumerable episodes—the whole course of the three months past which had contained so much. She came out of this strange whirl very miserable but very quiet.

"I think it is chiefly my fault," she said, faltering, interrupting the doctor who was talking, always talking; "but how could I know, for nobody told me? Doctor, tell me what to do now? You said we should—pull her through."

She gave him a faint, eager, conciliatory smile, appealing to him to do it. Of course he could do it! "Tell me—tell me only what to do."

He patted her kindly upon the shoulder. "That is right," he said. "Now you understand me, and I know I can trust you. There is not much to do. Only to be quiet and steady—no crying or agitation. Moulsey knows everything. But you must be ready and steady, my dear. Sit by her and look happy and keep up her courage—that's the chief thing. If she gives in it is all over. She must not see that you are frightened or miserable. Come, it's a great thing to do for a little girl that has never known any trouble. But you are of a good sort, and you must rise to it for your mother's sake."

Look happy! That was all she had to do. "Can't I help Moulsey," she asked. "I could fetch her what she wants. I could—go errands for her. Oh, doctor, something a little easier," cried Bee, clasping her hands, "just at first!"

"All that's arranged," he said, hastily. "Come, we must go back to our patient. She will be wondering what I am talking to you about. She will perhaps take fright. No, nothing easier, my poor child—if you can do that you may help me a great deal; if you can't, go to bed, my dear, that will be best."

She gave him a look of great scorn, and moved towards her mother's room, leading the way.

Mrs. Kingsward was lying with her face towards the door, watching, in a blaze of excitement and fever. Her eyes had never been so bright nor her colour so brilliant. She was breathing quickly, panting, with her heart very audible to herself, pumping in her ears, and almost audible in the room, so evident was it that every pulse was at fever speed. "What have you been telling Bee, doctor? What have you been telling Bee? What——" When she had begun this phrase it did not seem as if she could stop repeating it again and again.

"I have been telling her that she may sit with you, my dear lady, on condition of being very quiet, very quiet," said the doctor. "It's a great promotion at her age. She has promised to sit very still, and talk very little, and hush her mamma to sleep. It is you who must be the baby to-night. If you can get a good long quiet sleep, it will do you all the good in the world. Yes, you may hold her hand if you like, my dear, and pat it, and smooth it—a little gentle mesmerism will do no harm. That, my dear lady, is what I have been telling Miss Bee."

"Oh, doctor," said Mrs. Kingsward, "don't you know she has had great trouble herself, poor child? Poor little Bee! At her age I was married and happy; and here is she, poor thing, plunged into trouble. Doctor, you know, there is a—gentleman——"

Mrs. Kingsward had raised herself upon her

elbow, and the panting of her breath filled all the room.

"Another time—another time you shall tell me all about it. But I shall take Miss Bee away, and consign you to a dark room, and silence, if you say another word——"

"Oh, don't make my room dark! I like the light. I want my child. Let me keep her, let me keep her! Who should—comfort her—but her mother?"

"Yes, so long as you keep quiet. If you talk I will take her away. Not a word—not a word—till to-morrow." In spite of himself there was a change in the doctor's voice as he said that word—or Bee thought so—as if there might never be any to-morrow. The girl felt as if she must cry out, shriek aloud, to relieve her bursting brain, but did not, overborne by his presence and by the new sense of duty and self-restraint. "Come now," he went on, "I am very kind to let you have your little girl by you, holding your hand—don't you think so? Go to sleep, both of you. If you're quite, quite quiet you'll both doze, and towards the morning I'll look in upon you again. Now, not another word. Good-night, good-night."

Bee, whose heart was beating almost as strongly as her mother's, heard his measured step withdraw on the soft carpets with a sense of wild despair, as if the last hope was going from her. Her inexperienced imagination had leaped from complete ignorance and calm to the last possibilities of calamity.

She had never seen death, and what if that awful presence were to come while she was alone, incapable of any struggle, of giving any help. She listened to the steps getting fainter in the distance with anguish and terror unspeakable. She clasped her mother's hand tightly without knowing it. That only aid, the only man who could do anything, was going away—deserting them—leaving her alone in her ignorance to stand between her mother and death. Death! Every pulse sprang up and fluttered in mortal terror. And she was put there to be quiet—ready and steady, he had said—to look happy! Bee kept silent; kept sitting upon her chair; kept down her shriek after him with a superhuman effort. She could do no more.

“Listen—he's talking to Moulsey now,” said Mrs. Kingsward, “about me; they're always—whispering, about me—telling the symptoms—and how I am. That is the worst of nurses——”

“Mamma! Oh, don't talk, don't talk!” cried Bee; though she was more comforted than words can tell by the sound of her mother's voice.

“Whispering: can't you hear them? About temperature—and things. I can bear talking—but whispering. Bee — don't you hear 'em — whis — whispering——”

“Oh, mamma,” cried Bee, “I love to hear you speak! But don't, don't, don't, or they'll make me go away.”

“My baby,” said the mother, diverted in her wandering and weakness to a new subject, “my little

thing! He said we were to go to sleep. Put your head there—and I'll sing you—I'll sing you—to sleep—little Bee, little Bee, poor little Bee!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THIS night was the strangest in Bee Kingsward's life. She had never known what it was to remain silent and awake in the darkness and warmth of a sick room, which of itself is a strange experience for a girl, and shows the young spirit its own weakness, its craving for rest and comfort, the difficulty of overcoming the instincts of nature—with such a sense of humiliation as nothing else could give. Could you not watch with me one hour? She believed that she had lain awake crying all night when her dream of happiness had so suddenly been broken in upon at Cologne; but now, while she sat by her mother's side, and the little soft crooning of the song, which Mrs. Kingsward supposed herself to be singing to put her child to sleep, sank into a soft murmur, and the poor lady succeeded in hushing herself into a doze by this characteristic method, Bee's head dropped too, and her eyelids closed. Then she woke, with a little shiver, to see the large figure of Moulsey like a ghost by the bed, and struggled dumbly back to her senses, only remembering that she must not start nor cry to disturb Mrs. Kingsward, whose quick breathing filled the room with a sensation of danger and dismay to which the

girl was sensible as soon as the film of sleep that had enveloped her was broken. Mrs. Kingsward's head was thrown back on the pillow; now and then a faint note of the lullaby which she had been singing came from the parted lips, through which the hot, quick breath came so audibly. Now and then she stirred in her feverish sleep. Moulsey stood indistinguishable with her back to the light, a mass of solid shadow by the bedside. She shook her head. "Sleep's best," she said, in the whisper which the patient hated. "Sleep's better than the best of physic." Bee caught those solid skirts with a sensation of hope, to feel them so real and substantial in her hand. She did not care to speak, but lifted her face, pale with alarm and trouble, to the accustomed nurse. Moulsey shook her head again. It was all the communication that passed between them, and it crushed the hope that was beginning to rise in Bee's mind. She had thought when she heard the doctor go away that death might be coming as soon as his back was turned. She had felt when her mother fell asleep as if the danger must be past. Now she sank into that second stage of hopelessness, when there is no longer any immediate panic, when the unaccustomed intelligence dimly realises that the sufferer may be better, and may live through the night, or through many nights, and yet there may be no real change. Very dim as yet was this consciousness in Bee's heart, and yet the first dawning of it bowed her down.

In the middle of the night—after hours so long!

—more like years, when Bee seemed to have sat there half her life, to have become used to it, to be uncertain about everything outside, but only that her mother lay there more ill than words could say—Mrs. Kingsward awoke. She opened her eyes without any change of position with the habit of a woman who has been long ill, without acknowledging her illness. It was Moulsey who saw a faint reflection of the faint light in the softly opening eyes, and detected that little change in the breathing which comes with returning consciousness. Bee, with her head leant back upon her chair and her eyes closed, was dozing again.

“You must take your cordial, ma’am, now you’re awake. You’ve had such a nice sleep.”

“Have I? I thought I was with the children and singing to baby. Who’s this that has my hand—Bee?”

“Mamma,” cried the girl, with a little start, and then, “Oh! I have waked her, Moulsey, I have waked her!”

“Is this her little hand? Poor little Bee! No, you have not waked me, love; but why, why is the child here?”

“The doctor said she might stay—to send for him if you wanted anything—and—and to satisfy her.”

“To satisfy her, why so, why so? Am I so bad? Did he think I would die—in the night?”

“No, no, no,” said Moulsey, standing by her, patting her shoulder, as if she had been a fretful

child. "What a thing to fancy! As if he'd have sent the child here for that!"

"No," said the poor lady, "he wouldn't have sent the child, would he—not the child—for that—to frighten her! But Bee must go to bed. I'm so much better. Go to bed. Moulsey; poor Moulsey, never tires, she's so good. But you must go to bed."

"Oh, mother, let me stay. When you sleep, I sleep too; and I'm so much happier here."

"Happier, are you? Well—but there was something wrong. Something had happened. What was it that happened? And your father away! It never does for anything to happen when—my husband is away. I've grown so silly. I never know what to do. What was it that happened, Bee?"

"There was—nothing," said Bee, with a sudden chill of despair. She had forgotten everything but the dim bed-chamber, the faint light, the quick, quick breathing. And now there came a stab at her poor little heart. She scarcely knew what it was, but a cut like a knife going to the very centre of her being. Then there came the doctor's words, as if they were written in light across the darkness of the room—"Ready, and steady." She said in a stronger voice, "You have been dreaming. There was nothing, mamma."

"Mrs. Kingsward, who had raised herself on her elbow, sank back again on her pillow.

"Yes," she said, "I must have been dreaming. I thought somebody came—and told us. Dreams are

so strange. People say they're things you've been—thinking of. But I was not thinking of that—the very last thing! Bee, it's a pity—it's a great pity—when a woman with so many children falls into this kind of silly, bad health.”

“Oh, mamma,” was all that poor Bee could say.

“Oh—let me alone, Moulsey—I want to talk a little. I've had such a good sleep, you said; sometimes—I want to talk, and Moulsey won't let me—nor your father, and I have it all here,” she said, putting her hand to her heart, “or here,” laying it over her eyebrows, “and I never get it out. Let me talk, Moulsey—let me talk.”

Bee, leaning forward, and Moulsey standing over her by the bedside, there was a pause. Their eyes, accustomed to the faint light, saw her eyes shining from the pillow, and the flush of her cheeks against the whiteness of the bed. Then, after a while, there came a little faint laugh, and, “What was I saying?” Mrs. Kingsward asked. “You look so big, Moulsey, like the shadows I used to throw on the wall to please the children. You always liked the rabbit best, Bee. Look!” She put up her hands as if to make that familiar play upon the wall. “But Moulsey,” she added, “is so big. She shuts out all the light, and what is Bee doing here at this hour of the night? Moulsey, send Miss Bee to bed.”

“Oh, mother, let me stay. You were going to tell me something.”

“Miss Bee, you must not make her talk.”

“How like Moulsey!” said the invalid. “Make

me talk! when I have wanted so much to talk. Bee, it's horrid to go on in this silly ill way, when—when one has children to think of. Your father's always good—but a man often doesn't understand. About you, now—if I had been a little stronger, it might have been different. What was it we heard? I don't think it was true what we heard."

"Oh, mamma, don't think of that, now."

"It is *so* silly, always being ill! And there's nothing really the matter. Ask the doctor. They all say there's nothing really the matter. Your father—but then he doesn't know how a woman feels. I feel as if I were sinking, sinking down through the bed and the floor and everything, away, I don't know where. So silly, for nothing hurts me—I've no pain—except that I always want more air. If you were to open the window, Moulsey; and Bee, give me your hand and hold me fast, that I mayn't sink away. It's all quite silly, you know, to think so," she added, with again a faint laugh.

Bee's eyes sought those of Moulsey with a terrified question in them; the great shadow only slightly shook its head.

"Do you remember, Bee, the picture—we saw it in Italy, and I've got a photograph—where there is a saint lying so sweetly in the air, with angels holding her up? They're flying with her through the blue sky—two at her head, and other two—and her mantle so wrapped round her, and she lying, oh! so easy, resting, though there's nothing but the air and the angels. Do you remember, Bee?"

"Yes, mamma. Oh, mamma, mamma!"

"That's what I should like," said Mrs. Kingsward; "it's strange, isn't it? The bed's solid, and the house is solid, and Moulsey there, she's very solid too, and air isn't solid at all. But there never was anybody that lay so easy and looked so safe as that woman in the air. Their arms must be so soft under her, and yet so strong, you know; stronger than your father's. He's so kind, but he hurries me sometimes; and soft—you're soft, Bee, but you're not strong. You've got a soft little hand, hasn't she, Moulsey? Poor little thing! And to think one doesn't know what she may have to do with it before she is like me."

"She'll have no more to do with it, ma'am, than a lady should, no more than you've had. But you must be quiet, dear lady, and try and go to sleep."

"I might never have such a good chance of talking to her again. The middle of the night and nobody here—her father not even in the house. Bee, you must try never to begin being ill in any silly way, feeling not strong and that sort of foolish thing, and say out what you think. Don't be frightened. It's—it's bad for him as well as for you. He get's to think you haven't any opinion. And then all at once they find out— And, perhaps, it's too late—."

"Mamma, you're not very ill? Oh, no; you're looking so beautiful, and you talk just as you always did."

"She says am I very ill, Moulsey? Poor little

Bee! I feel a great deal better. I had surely a nice sleep. But why should the doctor be here, and you made to sit up, you poor little thing. Moulsey, why is the doctor here?"

"I never said, ma'am, as he was here. He's coming round first thing in the morning. He's anxious—because the Colonel's away."

"Ah! you think I don't know. I'm not so very bad; but he thinks—he thinks—perhaps I might die, Bee."

"Mamma, mamma!"

"Don't be frightened," said Mrs. Kingsward, drawing the girl close to her. "That's a secret; he doesn't think I know. It would be a curious, curious thing, when people think you are only ill to go and die. It would surprise them so. And so strange altogether—instead of worries, you know, every day, to be all by yourself, lying so easy and the angels carrying you. No trouble at all then to think whether he would be pleased—or anything; giving yourself to be carried like that, like a little child."

"But mamma," cried Bee, "you could not, would not leave us—you wouldn't, would you, mamma?—all the children, and me; and I with nobody else, no one to care for me. You couldn't, mother, leave us; you wouldn't! Say you wouldn't! Oh! Moulsey! Moulsey! look how far away she is looking, as if she didn't see you and me!"

"You forget, Bee," said Mrs. Kingsward. "How easy it looked for that saint in the picture. I always liked to watch the birds floating down on the wind,

never moving their wings. That's what seems no trouble, so easy; not too hot nor too cold, nor tiring, neither to the breath nor anything. I shouldn't like to leave you. No— But then:" she added, with a smile, "I should not require to leave you. I'd—I'd— What was I saying? Moulsey, will you please give me some—more—"

She held out her hand again for the glass which Moulsey had just put down.

"It makes me strong—it makes me speak. I'm—sinking away again, Bee. Hold me—hold me tight. If I was to slip away—down—down—down to the cellars or somewhere." The feeble laugh was dreadful for the listeners to hear.

"Run," cried Moulsey, in Bee's ear, "the doctor—the doctor! in the library."

And then there was a strange phantasmagoria that seemed to fill the night, one scene melting into another. The doctor rousing from his doze, his measured step coming back; the little struggle round the bed; Moulsey giving place to the still darker shadow; the glow of Mrs. Kingsward's flushed and feverish countenance between; then the quiet, and then again sleep—sleep broken by feeble movements, by the quick panting of the breath.

"She'll be easier now," the doctor said. "You must go to bed, my dear young lady. Moulsey can manage for the rest of the night."

"Doctor," said Bee, with something in her throat that stopped the words, "doctor—will she—must she?"

Oh, doctor, say that is not what it means? One of us, it would not matter, but mother—mother!”

“It is not in our hands,” the doctor said. “It is not much we can do. Don’t look at me as if I were God. It is little, little I can do.”

“They say,” cried poor Bee, “that you can do anything. It is when there is no doctor, no nurse that people—— Oh, my mother—my mother! Doctor, don’t let it be.”

“You are but a child,” said the doctor, patting her kindly on the shoulder, “you’ve not forgotten how to say your prayers. That’s the only thing for you to do. Those that say such things of doctors know very little. We stand and look on. Say your prayers, little girl—if they do her no good, they’ll do you good. And now she’ll have a little sleep.”

Bee caught him by the arm. “Sleep,” she said, looking at him suspiciously. “Sleep?”

“Yes, sleep—that may give her strength for another day. Oh, ask no more, child. Life is not mine to give.”

What a night! Out of doors it was moonlight as serene as heaven—the moon departing in the west, and another faint light that was day coming on the other side, and the first birds beginning to stir in the branches; but not even baby moving in the house. All fast asleep, safe as if trouble never was, as if death could not be. Bee went upstairs to her chill, white room, where the white bed, unoccupied, looked to her like death itself—all cold, dreadful, full of suggestion. Bee’s heart was more heavy than

could be told. She had nothing to fall back upon, no secret strength to uphold her. She had forgotten how wretched she had been, but she felt it, nevertheless, behind the present anguish. Nevertheless, she was only nineteen, and when she flung herself down to cry upon her white pillow—only to cry, to get her passion out—beneficent nature took hold of the girl and made her sleep. She did not wake for hours. Was it beneficent? For when she was roused by the opening of the door and sat up in her bed, and found herself still dressed in her evening frock, with her little necklace round her throat, there pressed back upon Bee such a flood of misery and trouble as she thought did not exist in the world.

“Miss Bee, Miss Bee! Master’s come home. He’s been travelling all night—and I dare not disturb Mrs. Moulsey in Missis’s room; and he want’s to see you this minit, please. Oh, come, come, quick, and don’t keep the Colonel waiting,” the woman said.

Half awakened, but wholly miserable, Bee sprang up and rushed downstairs to her father. He came forward to meet her at the door, frowning and pale.

“What is this I hear?” he said. “What have you been doing to upset your mother? She was well enough when I went away. What have you been doing to your mother? You children are the plague of our lives!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE week passed in the sombre hurry yet tedium of a house lying under the shadow of death—that period during which when it is night we long for morning, and when it is morning we long for night, hoping always for the hope that never comes, trembling to mark the progress which does go on silently towards the end.

Colonel Kingsward was rough and angry with Bee that first morning, to her consternation and dismay. She had never been the object of her father's anger before, and this hasty and imperious questioning seemed to take all power of reply out of her. "What had she been doing to her mother?" She! to her mother! Bee was too much frightened by his threatening look, the cloud on his face, the fire in his eyes, to say anything. Her mind ran hurriedly over all that had happened, and that last terrible visit, which had changed the whole aspect of the earth to herself. But it was to herself that this stroke of misfortune had come, and not to her mother. A gleam of answering anger came into Bee's eyes, sombre with the unhappiness which had been pushed aside by more immediate suffering, yet was still there like a black background, to frame whatever other miseries might come after. As for Colonel Kingsward, it was to him, as to so many men, a relief to blame somebody for the trouble which was unbear-

able. The blow was approaching which he had never allowed himself to believe in. He had blamed his wife instinctively, involuntarily, at the first hearing of every inconvenience in life; and it had helped to accustom him to the annoyance to think that it was her fault. He had done so in what he called this unfortunate business of Bee's, concluding that but for Mrs. Kingsward's weakness, Mr. Aubrey Leigh and his affairs would never have become of any importance to the family. He had blamed her, too, and greatly, for that weakening of health which he had so persistently endeavoured to convince himself did not mean half so much as the doctors said. Women are so idiotic in these respects. They will insist on wearing muslin and lace when they ought to wear flannel. They will put on evening dresses when they ought to be clothed warmly to the throat, and shoes made of paper when they ought to be solidly and stoutly shod, quite indifferent to the trouble and anxiety they may cause to their family. And now that Mrs. Kingsward's state had got beyond the possibility of reproach, he turned upon his daughter. It must be her fault. Her mother had been better or he should not have left her. The quiet of the country was doing her good; if she had not been agitated all would have been well. But Bee, with all her declarations of devotion to her mother; Bee, the eldest, who ought to have had some sense; Bee had brought on this trumpery love business to upset the delicate equilibrium which he himself, a man with affairs so much more important in hand, had refrained from

disturbing. It did him a little good, unhappy and anxious as he was, to pour out his wrath upon Bee. And she did not reply. She did not shed tears, as her mother had weakly done in similar circumstances, or attempt excuses. Even if he had been sufficiently at leisure to note it, an answering fire awoke in Bee's eyes. He had not leisure to note, but he perceived it all the same.

Presently, however, every faculty, every thought, became absorbed in that sick chamber; things had still to be thought of outside of it, but they seemed strange, artificial things, having no connection with life. Then Charlie was summoned from Oxford, and the younger boys from school, which increased the strange commotion of the house, adding that restless element of young life which had no place there, nothing to do with itself, and which roused an almost frenzied irritation in Colonel Kingsward when he saw any attempt on the part of the poor boys to amuse themselves, or resume their usual occupations. "Clods!" he said; "young brutes! They would play tennis if the world were falling to pieces." And again that glance of fire came into Bee's eyes, marked unconsciously, though he did not know he had seen it, by her father. The boys hung about her when she stole out for a little air, one at each arm. "How is mother, Bee? She's no worse? Don't you think we might go over to Hillside for that tournament? Don't you think Fred might play in the parish match with Siddemore? They're so badly off for bowlers. Don't you think——"

"Oh, I think it would be much better for you to be doing something, boys; but, then, papa might hear, and he would be angry. If we could but keep it from papa."

"We're doing mother no good," said Fred.

"How could we do mother good? Why did the governor send for us, Bee, only to kick our heels here, and get into mischief? A fellow can't help getting into mischief when he has nothing to do."

"Yes," repeated Fred, "what did he send for us for? I wish mother was better. I suppose as soon as she's better we'll be packed off again."

They were big boys, but they did not understand the possibility of their mother not getting better, and, indeed, neither did Bee. When morning followed morning and nothing happened, it seemed to her that getting better was the only conclusion to be looked for. If it had been Death that was coming, surely it must have come by this time. Her hopes rose with every new day.

But Mrs. Kingsward had been greatly agitated by the sight of Charlie when he was allowed to see her. "Why has Charlie come home?" she said. "Was he sent for? Was it your father that brought him? Charlie, my dear, what are you doing here? Why have you come back? You should have been going on with—— Did your father send for you? Why—why did your father send for you, my boy?"

"I thought," said Charlie, quite unmanned by the sight of her, and by this unexpected question, and

by all he had been told about her state, "I thought—you wanted to see me, mother."

"I always like to see you—but not to take you away from—— And why was he sent for, Moulsey? Does the doctor think?—does my husband think?——"

Her feverish colour grew brighter and brighter. Her eyes shone with a burning eagerness. She put her hot hand upon that of her son. "Was it to say good-bye to me?" she said, with a strange flutter of a smile.

At the same time an argument on the same subject was going on between the doctor and the Colonel.

"What can the children do in a sick room? Keep them away. I should never have sent for them if you had consulted me. It is bad enough to have let her see Charlie, summoned express—do you want to frighten your wife to death?"

"There can be no question," said the Colonel, "if what you tell me is true, of frightening her to death. I think, Benson, that a patient in such circumstances ought to know. She ought to be told——"

"What?" the doctor said, sharply, with a harsh tone in his voice.

"What? Do you need to ask? Of her state—of what is imminent—that she is going to——"

Colonel Kingsward loved his wife truly, and he could not say those last words.

"Yes," said the doctor, "going to——?" Well, we hope it's to One who has called her, that knows

all about it, Kingsward. Doctors are not supposed to take that view much, but I do. I'd tell her nothing of the sort. I would not agitate her either with the sight of the children or those heathenish thoughts about dying. Well, I suppose you'll take your own way, if you think she's in danger of damnation; but you see I don't. I think where she's going she'll find more consideration and more understanding than ever she got here."

"You are all infidels—every one of you," said Colonel Kingsward; "you would let a soul rush unprepared into the presence of—"

"Her Father," said Doctor Benson. "So I would; if he's her Father he'll take care of that. And if he's only a Judge, you know, a Judge is an extraordinarily considerate person. He leaves no means untried of coming to a right decision. I would rather trust my case in the hands of the Bench than make up my own little plea any day. And, anyhow you can put it, the Supreme Judge must be better than the best Bench that ever was. Leave her alone. She's safer with Him than either with you or me."

"It's an argument I never would pardon—in my own case. I shudder at the thought of being plunged into eternity without the time to—to think—to—to prepare——"

"But if your preparations are all seen through from the beginning? If it's just as well known then, or better, what you are thinking, or trying to think, to make yourself ready for that event? You knew yourself, more or less, didn't you, when you were in

active service, the excuses a wretched private would make when he was hauled up, and how he would try to make the worse appear the better cause. Were you moved by that, Colonel Kingsward? Didn't you know the man, and judge him by what you knew?"

"It seems to me a very undignified argument; there's no analogy between a wretched private and my—and my—and one of us—at the Judgment Seat."

"No—it's more like one of your boys making up the defence—when brought before you—and the poor boy would need it too," Dr. Benson added within himself. But naturally he made no impression with his argument, whether it was good or bad, upon his hearer. Colonel Kingsward was in reality a very unhappy man. He had nobody to blame for the dreadful misfortune which was threatening him except God, for whom he entertained only a great terror as of an overwhelming tyrannical Power ready to catch him at any moment when he neglected the observances or rites necessary to appease it. He was very particular in these observances—going to church, keeping up family prayers, contributing his proper and carefully calculated proportion to the charities, &c. Nobody could say of him that he was careless or negligent. And now how badly was his devotion repaid!—by the tearing away from him of the companion of his life. But he felt that there was still much more that the awful Master of the Universe might inflict, perhaps upon her if she was not

prepared to meet her God. He was wretched till he had told her, warned her, till she had fulfilled everything that was necessary, seen a clergyman, and got herself into the state of mind becoming a dying person. He had collected all the children that she might take leave of them in a becoming way. He had, so far as he knew, thought of everything to make her exit from the world a right one in all the forms—and now to be told that he was not to agitate her, that the God whom he wished to prepare her to meet knew more of her and understood her better than he did! Agitate her! When the alternative might be unspeakable miseries of punishment, instead of the acquittal which would have to be given to a soul properly prepared. These arguments did not in the least change his purpose, but they fretted and irritated him beyond measure. At the bottom of all, the idea that anybody should know better than he what was the right thing for his own wife was an intolerable thought.

He went in and out of her room with that irritated, though self-controlled look, which she knew so well. He had never shown it to the world, and when he had demanded of her in his angry way why this was and that, and how on earth such and such things had happened, Mrs. Kingsward had till lately taken it so sweetly that he had not himself suspected how heavy it was upon her. And when she had begun to show signs of being unable to bear the responsibility of everything in earth and heaven, the Colonel had felt himself an injured man. There

were signs that he might eventually throw that responsibility on Bee. But in the meantime he had nobody to blame, as has been said, and the burden of irritation and disturbance was heavy upon him.

The next morning after his talk with Dr. Brown he came in with that clouded brow to find Charlie by her bedside. The Colonel came up and stood looking at the face on the pillow, now wan in the reaction of the fever, and utterly weak, but still smiling at his approach.

"I have been telling Charlie," she said, in her faint voice, "that he must go back to his college. Why should he waste his time here?"

"He will not go back yet," said Colonel Kingsward; "are you feeling a little better this morning, my dear?"

"Oh, not to call ill at all," said the sufferer. "Weak—a sort of sinking, floating away. I take hold of somebody's hand to keep me from falling through. Isn't it ridiculous?" she said, after a little pause.

"Your weakness is very great," said the husband, almost sternly.

"Oh, no, Edward. It's more silly than anything—when I am not really ill, you know. I've got Charlie's hand here under the counterpane," she said again, with her faint little laugh.

"You won't always have Charlie's hand, or anyone's hand, Lucy."

She looked at him with a little anxiety.

"No, no. I'll get stronger, perhaps, Edward."

"Do you feel as if you were at all stronger, my dear?"

She loosed her son's hand, giving him a little troubled smile. "Go away now, Charlie dear. I don't believe you've had your breakfast. I want to speak to—papa." Then she waited, looking wistfully in her husband's face till the door had closed. "You have something to say to me, Edward. Oh, what is it? Nothing has happened to anyone?"

"No, nothing has happened," he said. He turned away and walked to the window, then came back again, turning his head half-way from her as he spoke. "It is only that you are, my poor darling—weaker every day."

"Does the doctor think so?" she said, with a little eagerness, with a faint suffusion of colour in her face.

He did not say anything—could not perhaps—but slightly moved his head.

"Weaker every day, and that means, Edward!" She put out her thin, hot hands. "That means——"

The man could not say anything. He could do his duty grimly, but when the moment came he could not put it into words. He sank down on the chair Charlie had left, and put down his face on the pillow, his large frame shaken by sobs which he could not restrain.

These sobs made Mrs. Kingsward forget the meaning of this communication altogether. She put her hands upon him trying to raise his head. "Edward! Oh, don't cry, don't cry! I have never seen

you cry in all my life. Edward, for goodness' sake! You will kill me if you go on sobbing like that. Oh, Edward, Edward, I never saw you cry before."

Moulsey had darted forward from some shadowy corner where she was and gripped him by the arm.

"Stop, sir—stop it," she cried, in an authoritative whisper, "or you'll kill her."

He flung Moulsey off and raised his head a little from the pillow.

"You have never seen me with any such occasion before," he said, taking her hands into his and kissing them repeatedly.

He was not a man of many caresses, and her heart was touched with a feeble sense of pleasure.

"Dear!" she said softly, "dear!" feebly drawing a little nearer to him to put her cheek against his.

Colonel Kingsward looked up as soon as he was able and saw her lying smiling at him, her hand in his, her eyes full of that wonderful liquid light which belongs to great weakness. The small worn face was all illuminated with smiles; it was like the face of a child—or perhaps an angel. He looked at first with awe, then with doubt and alarm. Had he failed after all in the commission which he had executed at so much cost to himself, and against the doctor's orders? He had been afraid for the moment of the sight of her despair—and now he was frightened by her look of ease, the absence of all perturbations. Had she not understood him? Would it have to be told again, more severely, more distinctly, this dreadful news?

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. KINGSWARD said nothing of the communication her husband had made to her. Did she understand it? He went about heavily all day, pondering the matter, going and coming to her room, trying in vain to make out what was in her mind. But he could not divine what was in that mind, hidden from him in those veils of individual existence which never seemed to him to have been so baffling before. In the afternoon she had heard, somehow, the voices of the elder boys, and had asked if they were there, and had sent for them. The two big fellows, with the mud on their boots and the scent of the fresh air about them, stood huddled together, speechless with awe and grief, by the bedside, when their father came in. They did not know what to say to their mother in such circumstances. They had never talked to her about herself, but always about themselves; and now they were entirely at a loss after they had said, "How are you, mamma? Are you very bad, mamma? Oh, I'm so sorry;" and "Oh, I wish you were better." What could boys of twelve and fourteen say? For the moment they felt as if their hearts were broken; but they did not want to stay there; they had nothing to say to her. Their pang of sudden trouble was confused with shyness and awkwardness, and their consciousness that she was alto-

gether in another atmosphere and another world. Mrs. Kingsward was not a clever woman, but she understood miraculously what was in those inarticulate young souls. She kissed them both, drawing each close to her for a moment, and then bade them run away. "Were you having a good game?" she said, with that ineffable, feeble smile. "Go and finish it, my darlings." And they stumbled out very awkwardly, startled to meet their father's look as they turned round, and greatly disturbed and mystified altogether, though consoled somehow by their mother's look.

They said to each other after a while that she looked "jolly bad," but that she was in such good spirits it must be all right.

Their father was as much mystified as they; but he was troubled in conscience, as if he had not spoken plainly enough, had not made it clear enough what "her state" was. She had not asked for the clergyman—she had not asked for anything. Was it necessary that he should speak again? There was one thing she had near her, but that so fantastic a thing!—a photograph—one of the quantities of such rubbish the girls and she had brought home—a woman wrapped in a mantle floating in the air.

"Take that thing away," he said to Moulsey. It irritated him to see a frivolous thing like that—a twopenny-halfpenny photograph—so near his wife's bed.

"Don't take it away," she said, in the whisper to

which her voice had sunk; "it gives me such pleasure."

"Pleasure!" he cried; even to speak of pleasure was wrong at such a moment. And then he added, "Would you like me to read to you? Would you like to see—anyone?"

"To see anyone? Whom should I wish to see but you, Edward, and the children?"

"We haven't been—so religious, my dear, as perhaps we ought," stammered the anxious man. "If I sent for—Mr. Baldwin perhaps, to read the prayers for the sick and—and talk to you a little?"

She looked at him with some wonder for a moment, and then she said, with a smile, "Yes, yes; by all means, Edward, if you like it."

"I shall certainly like it, my dearest; and it is right—it is what we should all wish to do at the——" He could not say at the last—he could not say when we are dying—it was too much for him; but certainly she must understand now. And he went away hurriedly to call the clergyman, that no more time might be lost.

"Moulsey," said Mrs. Kingsward, "have we come then quite—to the end now?"

"Oh, ma'am! Oh, my dear lady!" Moulsey said.

"My husband—seems to think so. It is a little hard—to leave them all. Where is Bee?"

"I am here, mamma," said a broken voice; and the mother's hand was caught and held tight, as she liked it to be. "May Betty come too?"

"Yes, let Betty come. It is you I want, not Mr. Baldwin."

"Mr. Baldwin is a good man, ma'am. He'll be a comfort to them and to the Colonel."

"Yes, I suppose so; he will be a comfort to—your father. But I don't want anyone. I haven't done very much harm——"

"No! oh, no, ma'am, none!" said Moulsey, while Betty, thrown on her knees by the bedside, tried to smother her sobs; and Bee, worn out and feeling as if she felt nothing, sat and held her mother's hand.

"But, then," she said, "I've never, never, done any good."

"Oh! my dear lady, my dear lady! And all the poor people, and all the children."

"Hush! Moulsey. I never gave anything—not a bit of bread, not a shilling—but because I liked to do it. Never! oh, never from any good motive. I always liked to do it. It was my pleasure. It never cost me anything. I have done no good in my life. I just liked the poor children, that was all, and thought if they were my own—— Oh, Bee and Betty, try to be better women—different from me."

Betty, who was so young, crept nearer and nearer on her knees, till she came to the head of the bed. She lifted up her tear-stained face, "Mother! oh, mother! are you frightened?" she cried.

Mrs. Kingsward put forth her other arm and put it freely round the weeping girl. "Perhaps I ought to be, perhaps I ought to be!" she said, with a little thrill and quaver.

"Mother," said Betty, pushing closer and closer, almost pushing Bee away, "if I had been wicked, ever so wicked, I shouldn't be frightened for you."

A heavenly smile came over the woman's face. "I should think not, indeed."

And then Betty, in the silence of the room, put her hands together and said very softly, "Our Father, which art in Heaven—"

"Oh, children, children," cried Moulsey, "don't break our hearts! She's too weak to bear it. Leave her alone."

"Yes, go away, children dear—go away. I have to rest—to see Mr. Baldwin." Then she smiled, and said in gasps, "To tell the truth—I'm—I'm not afraid; look—" She pointed to the picture by her bedside. "So easy—so easy! Just resting—and the Saviour will put out his hand and take me in."

Mr. Baldwin came soon after—the good Rector, who was a good man, but who believed he had the keys, and that what he bound on earth was bound in Heaven—or, at least, he thought he believed so—with Colonel Kingsward, who felt that he was thus fulfilling all righteousness, and that this was the proper way in which to approach the everlasting doors. He put away the little picture in which Catherine of Siena lay in the hold of the angels, in the perfect peace of life accomplished, the rest that was so easy and so sweet—hastily with displeasure and contempt. He did not wish the Rector to see the childish thing in which his wife had taken pleasure, nor even that she had been taking pleasure at

all at such a solemn moment; even that she should smile the same smile of welcome with which she would have greeted her kind neighbour had she been in her usual place in the drawing-room disturbed her husband. So near death and yet able to think of that! He watched her face as the Rector read the usual prayers. Did she enter into them—did she understand them? He could scarcely join in them himself in his anxiety to make sure that she felt and knew what was her “state,” and was preparing—preparing to meet her God. That God was awaiting severely the appearance of that soul before him, the Colonel could not but feel. He would not have said so in words, but the instinctive conviction in his heart was so. When she looked round for the little picture it hurt him like a sting. Oh, if she would but think of the things that concerned her peace—not of follies, childish distractions, amusements for the fancy. On her side, the poor lady was conscious more or less of all that was going on, understood here and there the prayers that were going over her head, prayers of others for her, rather than anything to be said by herself. In the midst of them, she felt herself already like St. Catherine, floating away into ineffable peace, then coming back again to hear the sacred words, to see the little circle round her on their knees, and to smile upon them in an utter calm of weakness without pain, feeling only that they were good to her, thinking of her, which was sweet, but knowing little more.

It was the most serene and cloudless night after that terrible day. A little after Colonel Kingsward had left the room finally and shut himself up in his study, Moulsey took the two girls out into the garden, through a window which opened upon it. "Children, go and breathe the sweet air. I'll not have you in a room to break your hearts. Look up yonder—yonder where she's gone," said the kind nurse who had done everything for their mother. And they stole out—the two little ghosts, overborne with the dreadful burden of humanity, the burden which none of us can shake off, and crept across the grass to the seat where she had been used to sit among the children. The night was peace itself—not a breath stirring, a young moon with something wistful in her light looking down, making the garden bright as with a softened ethereal day. A line of white cloud dimly detached from the softness of the blue lay far off towards the west amid the radiance, a long faint line as of something in the far distance. Bee and Betty stood and gazed at it with eyes and hearts overcharged, each leaning upon the other. Their young souls were touched with awe and an awful quiet. They were too near the departure to have fallen down as yet into the vacancy and emptiness of re-awakening life. "Oh," they said, "if that should be her!" And why should it not be? Unless perhaps there was a quicker way. They watched it with that sob in the throat which is of all sounds and sensations the most overwhelming. It seemed to them as if they were watching her a little further

on her way, to the very horizon, till the soft distance closed over, and that speck like a sail upon the sea could be seen no more. And when it was gone they sank down together upon her seat, under the trees she loved, where the children had played and tumbled on the grass about her, and talked of her in broken words, a little phrase now and then, sometimes only "Mother," or "Oh, mamma, mamma," now from one, now from another—in that first extraordinary exaltation and anguish which is not yet grief.

They did not know how long they had been there when something stirred in the bushes, and the two big boys, Arthur and Fred, came heavily into sight, holding each other by the arm. The boys were bewildered, heavy and miserable, not knowing what to do with themselves nor where to go. But they came up with a purpose, which was a little ease in the trouble. It cost them a little convulsion of reluctant crying before they could get out what they had to say. Then it came out in broken words from both together. "Bee, there's someone wants to speak to you at the gate."

"Oh! who could want to speak to me—to-night? I cannot speak to anyone; you might have known."

"Bee," said Arthur, the eldest, "it isn't just—anyone; it's—we thought you would perhaps—"

"He told us," said Fred, "who he was; and begged so hard—"

Then there came back upon poor Bee all the

other trouble that she had pushed away from her. Her heart seemed to grow hard and cold after all the softening and tenderness of this dreadful yet heavenly hour. "I will see no one—no one," she said.

"Bee," said the boys, "we shut the gate upon him; but he took hold of our hands, and—and cried, too." They had to stop and swallow the sob before either could say any more. "He said she was his best friend. He said he couldn't bear it no more than us. And if you would only speak to him."

Bee got up from her mother's seat; her poor little heart swelled in her bosom as if it would burst. Oh! how was she to bear all this—to bear it all—to have no one to help her! "No, no, I will not. I will not!" she said.

"Oh, Bee," cried Betty, "if it is Aubrey—poor Aubrey! She was fond of him. She would not like him to be left out. Oh, Bee, come; come and speak to him. Suppose one of us were alone, with nobody to say mother's name to!"

"No, I will not," said Bee. "Oh! Betty, mother knows why; she knows."

"What does she know?" cried Betty, pleading. "She was fond of him. I am fond of him, without thinking of you, for mother's sake."

"Oh, let me go! I am going in; I am going to her. I wish, I wish she had taken me with her! No, no, no! I will never see him more."

"I think," said Betty to the boys, pushing them

away, "that she is not quite herself. Tell him she's not herself. Say she's not able to speak to anyone, and we can't move her. And—and give poor Aubrey—oh, poor Aubrey!—my love."

The boys turned away on their mission, crossing the gravel path with a commotion of their heavy feet which seemed to fill the air with echoes.

Colonel Kingsward heard it from his study, though that was closed up from any influence outside. He opened his window and came out, standing a black figure surrounded by the moonlight. "Who is there?" he said. "Are there any of you so lost to all feeling as to be out in the garden, of all nights in the world on this night?"

CHAPTER XX.

AUBREY LEIGH had been living a troubled life during the time which had elapsed since the swallowing up in the country of the family in which he had become so suddenly interested, of which, for a short time, he had felt himself a member, and from which, as he felt, he could never be separated, whatever arbitrary laws might be made by its head. When they disappeared from London, which was done so suddenly, he was much cast down for the moment, but, as he had the fullest faith in Bee, and was sustained by her independence of character and determination to stand by him whatever happened, he

was, though anxious and full of agitation, neither despairing nor even in very low spirits. To be sure there were moments in which his heart sank, recalling the blank countenance of the father, and the too gentle and yielding disposition of the mother, and Bee's extreme youth and habits of obedience to both. He felt how much there was to be said against himself—a man who had been forced into circumstances of danger which nobody but himself could fully understand, and against which his whole being had revolted, though he could say but little on the subject. And, indeed, who was to understand that a man might yield to a sudden temptation which he despised and hated, and that he could not even explain that this was so, laying the blackest blame upon another—to a man, and still less to a woman; which last was impossible, and not even to be thought of. He might tell it, perhaps, to his mother, and there was a possibility of help there; though even there a hundred difficulties existed. But he was not wound up to that last appeal, and he felt, at first, but little fear of the eventual result. He was assured of Bee's faithfulness, and how could any parent stand out against Bee? Not even, he tried to persuade himself, the stern Colonel, who had so crushed himself. And she had received his first letters, and had answered them, professing her determination never to be coerced in this respect.

He was agitated, his life was full of excitement, and speculation, and trouble. But this is nothing dreadful in a young man's life. It was perhaps

better, more enlivening, more vivid, than the delights of an undisturbed love-making, followed by a triumphant marriage. It is well sometimes that the course of true love should not run smooth. He thought himself unhappy in being separated from Bee; but the keen delight of her determination to stand by him for good or evil, her faith in him, her championship, and the conviction that this being so all must come right in the end, was like a stream of bright fresh water flowing through the somewhat sombre flat of his existence. It had been very sombre in the early days of what people thought his youthful happiness—very flat, monotonous, yet with ignoble contentions in it. Bee's sunshiny nature, full of lights and shadows, had changed the whole landscape, and now the excitement of this struggle for her changed it still more. It might be a hard battle, but they would win in the end. Whether he, a somewhat unlucky fellow, would have done so was very doubtful—but for her the stars would fight in their courses. Everything would be overturned in the world, rather than that Bee should be made miserable, and since she had set her dear heart on him, on his behalf too the very elements would fight, for how otherwise could Bee be made happy? The argument was without a flaw.

This was his reasoning, never put, I need not say, into any formula of words, yet vaguely believed in, and forming a source of the brightest exhilaration in his life, rousing all combative influences by the power of that hope of success which was a certainty

in such a case. This exhilaration was crossed by the blackest of disappointments, and threatened to become despair when for days he had no sign of existence from Bee: but that after all was only a keener excitement—the sting of anxiety which makes after satisfaction more sweet. And then he was consoled to hear of Mrs. Kingsward's illness, which explained everything. Not that Aubrey was selfish enough to rejoice in that poor lady's suffering. He would have been shocked and horrified by the thought. But then it was no unusual thing for Mrs. Kingsward to be ill; it is not unusual, a young man so easily thinks, for any middle-aged person to be ill—and in so many cases it does not seem to do them much harm; whereas it did him much good—for it explained the silence of Bee!

And then it came to Aubrey's ears that Mrs. Kingsward was very ill—worse than she had ever been before; and then that all the family had been summoned—that she was dying. Such rumours spread like wildfire—they get into the air—nobody knows how they come. He went down to the village nearest Kingswarden, and found a lodging there, when this news reached him, and endeavoured to send a note to Bee, to let her know he was at hand. But in the trouble of the house this note, sent by a private hand—always in these days an unsafe method—was somehow lost and never reached her. He hung about the house in the evenings, avoiding on various occasions an encounter with Charlie, who was not friendly, and with the Colonel, who was his enemy.

These two were the only members of the family visible outside the gates of Kingswarden—until he managed to identify the two boys, whose disconsolate wanderings about pointed them out to him, and who did not know, therefore had no hostility or suspicion of the stranger who inquired after their mother so anxiously. Everybody inquired after their mother. It was nothing strange to them to be stopped on the road with this question. It was thus at last, hearing the final blow had fallen, Aubrey had ventured to send a message, to ask for a word from Bee. The thought of what the girl must be suffering in her first grief, and to feel himself so near her—almost within hearing—yet altogether shut out, was more than he could bear. He pushed in within the gate, into the shelter of the shrubbery, and there he stopped short, bound by invisible restraints. It was the home of his love, and yet it was the house of his enemy. He could not take advantage of the darkness of the night and of the misery of the moment to violate the sanctuary of a man soul-stricken by such trouble. But from where he stood he could see the little group of shadows under the tree. And how could he go away and not say a word to her—not take her in his arms, tell her his heart was with her, and that he was a mourner too? “Ask Bee to speak to me. Ask her to speak to me—only for a moment. I am Aubrey Leigh,” he said to the two brothers, taking an arm of each, imploring them. The boys did not know much about Aubrey Leigh, but still they had heard the name. And they were

overawed by his earnestness; the sound of his voice which, full of passion and feeling as it was, was strange to their undeveloped consciousness. They took his message, as we have seen, and then there came a mysterious moment which Aubrey could not understand. He could not hear what was said, but he was conscious of a resistance, of denial, and that Bee did not make a step towards him; that she recoiled rather than advanced. Though he could scarcely see anything distinctly, he could see that—that there was no impulse towards him, but rather the reverse; that Bee did not wish to come. And then the harsh voice of the Colonel broke the spell of the quiet, of the mournful, tranquil night, which it was so easy for a roused imagination to think was penetrated, too, by the sentiment of sorrow and of peace. The Colonel's voice put every gentler vision to flight. "Is it possible that any of you are out here in the garden—of all nights in the world on this night?" Oh! the very night of all nights to be there—in the first awe and silence, watching her pass, as it were, to the very gates of Heaven! Perhaps, it was unawares from Bee's mind that this idea came to his—"to watch her ascending, trailing clouds of glory," as the poet said; but that was the spirit coming and not going. These thoughts flew through his mind in the shock and irritation of the Colonel's voice. And then the shadows under the tree seemed to fly away and disperse, and silence fell upon all around, the great ghostly trees standing up immovable like muffled giants in the moonlight, their

shadows making lines and heavy clumps of blackness on the turf, the late roses showing pale in the distance, the garden paths white and desolate. A moment more, and the harsh sound, almost angry, of the Colonel's window shutting, of bolts and bars, and a final closing up of everything came unkindly upon the hushed air. And then the moonlight reached the shut up house, all unresponsive, with death in it, with one faint light burning in the large window upstairs, showing where the gentle inmate lay who needed light no more. Strange prejudice of humanity that puts out all the lights for sleep, but surrounds death with them, that no careless spirit may mistake for a common chamber the place where that last majesty lies.

Aubrey stood alone in this hushed and silent world. His heart was as heavy as a stone, heavy with grief for the friend who had passed for ever out of his life. He had not known perhaps till now what he too had lost—a friend, who would not have forsaken him, not a very strong champion to fight for him; but a friend that never, whatever might be said, would have refused to hear him, refused to give him her sympathy. Had Bee, his own Bee, refused? The young man was bewildered beyond the power of thought. Was it his fault to have come too soon? Was it an outrage to be there on the night of the mother's death? But there was no outrage in his thoughts, not even any selfishness. It was her he had been thinking of, not himself; that she might feel there was someone whose thoughts were all hers,

who was herself, not another, feeling with her, mourning with her, her very own to take the half of her burden. He had felt that he could not be far away while Bee was in trouble—that even to stand outside would be something, would somehow lighten her load, would make her feel in the very air a consciousness of the mighty love that would

cleave in twain
The lading of a single pain
And part it giving half to him.

His heart, which had so gone out to her, seemed to come back confused, with all the life out of it, full of wonder and dismay. Had she rejected him and his sympathy? Was it the fault of the others, the boys who did not know what to say? Was she angry that he should come so soon? But it was now, immediately on the very stroke of the distress, that love should come. He stood for a long time silent, bewildered, not knowing what to think. Was it possible that she could have misunderstood him, have thought that he had come here only to beguile her into his arms, to take advantage of an opportunity? It pained poor Aubrey to the heart to think that she might have thought so. Ah! Mrs. Kingsward would not have done it, would not have let Bee do it. But she lay there, where the light was, never to say anything more: and Bee—Bee!

He got out of the little park that surrounded Kingswarden by the stile near the village, some time after, he did not know how long. He thought it was

in the middle of the night. The moon had set, everything was dark, and all the cottagers asleep. But time is long to watchers unaccustomed to long vigils, and the lights were not out at the small inn in the village where he was lodging. He found the master of the house and his wife talking at the door in subdued tones, over the event of the evening. "She was always a weakly body, but she'll be sore missed," the woman said. "She kept everything going. The Colonel, he'll not have a servant left as will put up with him in three months. You take my word. She kept all straight. Lord, that's how women mostly is—no account as long as they're living—and then you finds the want o' them when they're gone."

"Here you are, mister," said the landlord; "we thought as you was lost. It was a fine night, tempting for a walk. But it's clouding over now."

"Oh, no, sir, nought of the sort," said the woman. "My master here, he never goes to bed afore the middle of the night, he don't, and it's an excuse for not getting up in the mornin'. But you'll have to be early to-morrow, Gregg, you take my word, for there'll be undertakers' men and that sort down from London, and I'll not be bothered with them, mind you that."

"I suppose you're right this time," said the man. "They drinks a deal to keep up their spirits, being as it is a kind of depressing trade."

"If I hear you laugh again like that!—and the missis lying in her coffin! Don't you think, sir, as he's got no feeling. He puts it off like with a laugh

not to cry. I was kitchen-maid up there, and he was groom in the old days, and many and many's the kindness she done to me and mine. Oh, and such a pretty lady and sweet—and a young family left just at the ages that most need a mother's care."

"They're all ages, Molly, if you come to that."

"Well, and don't they want a mother's care at all ages? What would you do with my children if I was took, John Gregg? And the Colonel, he's just a helpless man like you are. The only hope is as Miss Bee will turn out like her mother. I always thought she favoured Missis, though some said it was the Colonel she was like. It's a dreadful charge for her, poor thing, at her age; but if she takes after the Missis there will be some hope for them," the woman said.

"I thought as Miss Bee was going to be married?" said the landlord.

"Oh, that's all broken off," she said, "and a good thing too, seeing what's happened, for what could ever little Miss Betty do?"

Aubrey, who had lingered listening, went slowly up the narrow wooden stair to his shabby little room as the pair locked the door and put out their lights. He heard them carrying on the conversation in the kitchen underneath for a few minutes before they, too, in their turn clambered upstairs to bed. "Oh, that's all broken off, and a good thing too." He kept saying these words over and over miserably, as if they had been the chorus of some dreadful song of fate.

CHAPTER XXI.

AUBREY stayed at the village public-house day after day, hoping for some sign or message. He wrote to Bee, this time by the post; but he had no better success. Was it only because of her grief that she took no notice? Terrible as that grief must be, and rigorous as evidently were the rules of the closed-up house, from which no one came forth, even for a mouthful of air, it did not seem to him that this was reason enough for putting him from her—he who was to share her life, and whose sympathy was so full and overflowing. Surely it was the moment when all who loved her should gather round her, when she most wanted solace and support. It would not be that her heart was so wrapped up in sorrow that she should push from her the man who had the best right to share her tears—whom her mother approved and liked, whose acceptance she had ratified and confirmed. It could not be that. He felt that, had he been in the same circumstances, his cry would have been for Bee to stand by him, to comfort him. Was she so different, or was she overwhelmed by what was before her—the charge of her father's house, the dreadful suggestion that it was to him and the children she should dedicate herself henceforward, giving up her own

happiness? It seemed to Aubrey, after long thinking, that this must be the cause of her silence; the burden which surely was not for her young shoulders, which never could be intended for her, must have come down upon her, crushing her. She was the eldest girl. She must have, like so many girls, an exaggerated sense of what was her duty. Her duty! Could anything be more fantastic, more impossible? To take her mother's place—and her mother had been killed by it!—to humour the stern father—to take care of the tribe of children, to be their nurse, their ruler—everything that a creature of nineteen could not, should not be! And for this she would throw aside her own life—and him, whose life it was also. He would never, never consent to such a sacrifice, he said to himself. Bee was not soft and yielding, like their mother. She was a determined little thing. She would stand to it, and sacrifice him as she sacrificed herself, unless he made a bold stand from the first. No, no, no! Whatever was to be done, that must not be done. He would not have it—he must let her know from the very first—if it were not that she knew already, and that this was the reason why she was silent, feeling that if ever they met she could not hold out against him. Poor little Bee! Poor, poor little Bee! Her mother dead, and her father so stern; and thinking it her duty—her duty, God bless her!—to take all that household upon her little shoulders. The tears came into his eyes with a sudden softening. She thought it better to keep him at arm's length, the darling, knowing that she never could

stand against him, that he would never, never consent; the little sublime, unreasonable girl! The things they took into their heads, these inexperienced, generous creatures! But, thank heaven, he was here; even though she held him at bay—here, to make all right.

The reader knows that poor Bee was not actuated by such lofty feelings, but then Aubrey had no knowledge in his mind of that strange story which had destroyed her faith in him. When a man is guilty he knows all that can be brought against him, in which, in its way, there is a certain advantage. He cannot be taken by surprise. He knows that this or that is lying ready like a secret weapon apt to be picked up by any man who may wish to do him harm. But the innocent man has not that safeguard. It is not likely to occur to him that harmless circumstances may be so twisted as to look like guilt. For his own part he had forgotten all about that little episode on the railway—or if he remembered it, it was with a smile and a glow of momentary pleasure, to think how, with a little money—so small a matter—he had been able to make comfort take the place of misery to the poor little family, whom perhaps he would never have noticed at all had not his thoughts been full of Bee. He had done that for her with the feeling with which he might have given her an ornament or a basket of flowers; the only drawback to the pleasure of it being that he could not tell her off-hand, and get the smile of thanks she would give him for it—far more than he deserved, for he liked

doing it—kindness coming natural to this young man. It was hard on Aubrey in the complications of fate that this innocent, nay praiseworthy, incident should be made the occasion of his trouble. But he had no suspicion of it—forgot the fact, indeed, altogether—and would have laughed at the idea that such an accidental occurrence could in any way influence his fate.

He went to the funeral, unnoticed in the crowd of people who were there—some for love and some for conventional necessity, but almost all with a pang of natural sympathy to see the train of children who followed their mother to her last rest. The Colonel, rigid in all things, had insisted at last, that all, except the very youngest, should be there—having wavered for a moment whether it would not be more in order that the girls should remain at home, and only the boys be present at the melancholy ceremony. To see the little wondering faces two-and-two that followed the elder children up the aisle, and were installed in the mourners' places, some of them scarcely tall enough to see over the edge of the pew, brought many a gush of tears to sympathetic eyes. Bee and Betty, the two inseparable "eldest,"—slim, black figures—drooping under the heavy veils that covered them from the daylight, almost touched Aubrey with their clinging black garments as they passed. Did they see him? He saw, wherever he was, at whatever distance, any movement they made. He saw that Bee never raised her head; but Betty was younger, and less self-restrained—that she

had seen him at least he felt sure. And he felt the Colonel's eyes upon him, penetrating the thickest of the crowd. Colonel Kingsward had a glance that saw everything. He was a man bereaved, the light of his eyes taken from him, and the comfort of his life—and yet he saw everything at his wife's funeral, saw and noted the faces that were dull and tired of the tension, and those that were alive with sympathy—making notes for or against them in his memory, and, above all, he saw Aubrey Leigh. Charlie saw him more accidentally, without any conscious observation, and the boys who had cried all they were capable of, and now could not help their eyes straying a little, conscious of the spectacle, and of the important part they played in it, everybody looking at them. All of them saw him, but Bee. Was it only Bee who was so little in sympathy with him that she did not know he must be there?

He went back to his lodging a little angry through his emotion. It was too much. Even in the interval between her mother's death and funeral he felt that a girl who loved him should not be so obdurate as that, and he listened with a very sombre face to all the landlady's discussion of the proceedings. "It was a shame," she said, "to bring those little children there, not much more than babies—what could they know? I'd have kept them safe in the nursery with some quiet game to play, the poor little innocents! And so would Missis. Missis would have thought what was best for them, not for making a

display. But God knows what will become of them children now."

"What should become of them?" said the husband. "They'll get the best of everything and servants to wait on them hand and foot. The Colonel, he ain't like a poor man who could do nothing for them. When the mother's gone the children had better go too—in a poor man's house."

"It's little you know about it," said the woman with contempt. "Rich house or poor house, it don't make no such great difference. Nurses is a long way different from mothers. Not as I'm saying a word against Sarah Langridge, as is a good honest woman, that would wrong her master not by a candle end or a boot lace, not she. But that's not like being a mother. The Lord grant that if I die and there's a baby it may go too, as you say. You're more than a nurse, you're their father, and you're part of them; but Lord forbid that I should leave a poor little baby on your hands."

The man turned on his heel with a tremulous laugh. "Well, I ain't wishing it, am I?" he said.

"But," said Aubrey, "there are the—elder sisters—the young ladies."

"Miss Bee! Lord bless us, sir, do ye know the age that child is? Nineteen, and no more. Is that an age to take the charge of a nursery full of children? Why, her mother was but forty as has been laid in her grave to-day. I wish to goodness as that marriage hadn't been broke off. He was a

widower—and I don't much hold with widowers—but I wish that I could give him a sign to come back, if he has any spirit in him, and try and get that poor young lady away."

"If he has been sent about his business," said Aubrey, forcing a smile, "he could have no right to come back."

"I don't know whose fault it was," said the landlady. "None o' missis's, you take my word; but, Lord, if a gentleman loves a young lady, what's to hinder him putting his pride in his pocket? A man does when he's real fond of a woman in our rank of life."

"I don't know about that," said her husband. "If I had been sent away with a cuff on the side of my head, blessed if I'd ever have come back."

"You're a poor lot, all of you," the woman said.

Aubrey could not but smile at the end of the argument, but he asked himself when he was alone—Was he a poor lot? Was he unwilling to put his pride in his pocket? Walking about his little room, turning over and over the circumstances, remembering the glare from Colonel Kingsward's eye, which had recognised him, he at last evolved out of his own troubled feelings and imagination the idea that it was his part to offer sympathy, to hold out an olive branch. Perhaps, after all, the stern man's heart was really touched; perhaps it would soothe him in his grief to hear that "when the eye saw her, then it blessed her," which was Aubrey's sincere feeling at this moment in respect to Bee's mother.

It seemed to him that it was best to act upon this impulse before other arguments came in; before the sense of wounding and pain in Bee's silence got the upper hand. He spent most of the afternoon in writing a letter, so carefully put together, copied over and over again, that there might be nothing in it to wound the most sensitive feelings; offering to Colonel Kingsward his profound sympathy, telling him with emotion of her kindness to himself, her sweetness, her beauty, with that heightening of enthusiastic admiration, which, if it is permissible anywhere, is so over a new-made grave. And at the end he asked, with all the delicacy he could, whether in these new circumstances he might not ask a hearing, a renewed consideration, for her dear sake who had been so good to him, and who was gone.

I am not sure that his judgment went fully with this renewed effort, and his landlady's remarks were but a poor reason for any such step. But his heart was longing after Bee, angry with her, impatient beyond words, disturbed, miserable, not knowing how to support the silence and separation while yet so near. And to do something is always a relief, even though it may be the worst and not the best thing to do. In the evening after dark, when there was no one about, he went up to Kingswarden, and himself put his letter into the hands of the butler, who did not know him, and therefore knew no reason why the letter should either be carried in haste to his master or delayed. Aubrey heard that the young ladies were quite as well as could be expected, and

the Colonel very composed, considering—and then he returned to the village. How silent the house was! Not a creature about, and how disturbing and painful to the anxious spirit even the simple noises and commotion of the village street.

Next morning a letter came, delivered by the postman, from Kingswarden. It contained only a few words.

“Colonel Kingsward is obliged to Mr. Aubrey Leigh for his message of sympathy, but, on consideration of the whole circumstances, thinks it better that no pretence at intercourse should be resumed. It could be nothing but painful to both parties, and Colonel Kingsward, with his compliments, takes the liberty to suggest that Mr. Aubrey Leigh would do well to remain in the neighbourhood as short a time as suits his convenience.

“Kingswarden, October 15.”

Inside were the two or three notes which Aubrey on different occasions—twice by post and once by a private messenger—had sent to Bee. They had not been opened. The young man's colour rose with a fiery indignation—his heart thumped in his ears. This was an explanation of which he had not thought. To keep back anyone's letters had not occurred to him as a thing that in the end of the eighteenth century any man would dare to do. It seemed to bring him back face to face with old-fashioned, forgotten methods, of all sorts of antiquated kinds. He put down the papers on the table with a sort of awe. How was he to struggle against such ways of warfare? Bee might think he had not written at all

—had shown no sympathy with her in her trouble. How likely that it was this that had made her angry, that kept her from saying a word, from vouchsafing a look! She might think it was he who was deficient, who showed no feeling. What was he to do? The landlady coming up with his breakfast broke in upon this distracting course of thought.

"I didn't know, sir, as you were acquainted with the Colonel's family," the woman said.

"A little," said poor Aubrey. The letters were all lying on the table, giving to a sharp observer a very good clue to the position. Mrs. Gregg had noted the unopened letters returned to him in the Colonel's enclosure at the first glance.

"You didn't ought to have let us talk. Why, we might have been saying, without thinking, some ill of the Colonel or of Miss Bee."

He smiled, though with little heart. "You were once in their service," he said, "do you ever go there now?"

"Oh, yes, now and again," said Mrs. Gregg. "Sarah Langridge, as is in the nursery, is a cousin of mine, and I do go just to see them all now and again."

"Would you venture to take a letter from me to —Miss Kingsward?"

"Sir," said Mrs. Gregg, "is it about the marriage as was broke off? Is it?" she added quickly, as he answered her by nodding his head, "likely to come on again? That's what I want to know."

"If it does not," said Aubrey, "it will not be my fault."

"Then I will and welcome," the landlady said. "It's natural I should want to go the day after the funeral, to see about everything. Give me your letter, sir, and I'll get it put safe into Miss Bee's own hands."

All that he sent was half-a-dozen words of appeal.

"Bee, these have been sent back to me. Was it by your will? I have been here since ever I heard of her illness, longing to be with you, to tell you what I felt for her and you. And you would not speak to me! Bee, dearest, say you did not mean it. Tell me what I am to do.

"A. L."

How long the woman was in getting ready—how long in going! Before she came back it was almost night again of the lingering, endless day. She brought him a little note, not returning the enclosures—that was always something—with a reproach. "Oh, sir, and you very near got me into terrible trouble! I'll never, never carry anything from you again." The note was still shorter than his own:—

"It was not by my will. I have never seen them till now. But please—please let this be the last. We can't meet again. There can never more be anything between us—not from my father's will, but my own. And this for ever—and your own heart will tell you why.

"BEE."

"My own heart will tell me why! My heart tells me nothing—nothing!" poor Aubrey said to himself

in the silence of his little room. But there was little use in repeating it to himself, and there was no other ear to hear.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was with a sort of stupified bewilderment that Aubrey read over and over the little letter of Bee's. Letter! To call it a letter. Those straggling lines without any beginning, no name of him to whom they were addressed, nothing even of the most superficial courtesy, nothing that marked the link that had been—unless it were, perhaps, the abruptness, the harshness, which she would have used to no other. This was a kind of painful comfort in its way, when he came to think of it. To nobody but him would she have written so—this was the little gleam of light. And she had retained his letters, though she had forbidden him from sending more. These lights of consolation leaped into his mind with the first reading, but the more he repeated that reading, the darker grew the prospect, and the less comfort they gave him. "Not by my father's will, but my own; and your own heart will tell you why." What did she mean by his own heart? She had begun to write conscience, and then drew her pen through it. Conscience! What had he done? The real trouble of his life Bee had forgiven. Her father had stood upon it, and nothing had changed his standing ground

so far as the Colonel was concerned; but Bee, who did not understand—how should any girl understand?—had forgiven him, had flung his reproach away and accepted him as he was. How was it that she should thus go back on her decision now? “Not my father’s will, but mine. And your conscience will tell you why.” Aubrey’s conscience reproached him with nothing, with no thought of unfaithfulness to the young and spotless love which had re-created his being. He had never denied the old reproach. But what was it, what was it which she bid him to remember, which would explain the change in her? “Your heart will tell you why”—why his heart? and what was there that could be told him, which could explain this? He walked about his little room all night, shaking the little rickety house with his tread, asking himself, “What was it, what was it?” and finding no answer anywhere.

When he got up from a troubled morning sleep, these disturbed and unrefreshing slumbers, full of visions which turn the appearance of rest into the most fatiguing of labour, Aubrey formed a resolution, which he said to himself he should perhaps have carried out from the first. He had an advocate who could take charge of his cause without any fear of betrayal, his mother, and to her he would go without delay. Of all things in the world to do, after the reception of Bee’s note, giving in was the last thing he could think of. To accept that strange and agitated decision, to allow that there was something in his own heart that would explain it to him, was

what he would not and could not do. There was nothing in his own consciousness, in his heart or conscience, as she had said, that could explain it. Nothing! It was not to his credit to accept such a dismissal, even if he had been unaffected by it. He could not let a mystery fall over this, leaving it as one of those things unexplained which tear life in pieces. That would be mere weakness, not the mode of action of a man of sense who had no exposure to face. But if his letters were intercepted—miserable folly!—by the father, a man of the world who ought to know that such proceedings were an anachronism—and rejected by herself, it was little use that he should continue writing. Against two such methods of silencing him no man could contend. But there was still one other great card to play. He went out and took a last view of the sheltered and flowery dwelling of Kingswarden, as it could be seen among the trees at one part of the road. The windows were open and all the blinds drawn up. The house had come back out of the shadow of death into the everyday composure of living. White curtains fluttered in the wind at the upper windows. The late climbing roses and pretty bunches of clematis seemed again to look in. It was still like summer, though the year was waning, and the sun still shone, notwithstanding all sorrow. Aubrey saw no one, however, but a housemaid, who paused as she passed to put up a window, and looked out for a moment. That was all. He had not the chance of seeing any face that he wished to see. In the village he met the two

boys, who recognised him sheepishly with their eyes, and a look from one to another, but were about to shuffle past, Reginald on the heels of Arthur, to escape his notice—when he stopped them, which was a fact they were unprepared for, and had not calculated how to meet. He told them that he was going away, a definite fact upon which they seized eagerly. “Oh, so are we,” they said, both together, one of them adding the explanation that there was always something going on at school. “And there’s nothing to do here,” the other added. “I hope we’ll, sometime or other, know each other better,” said Aubrey, at which the boys hung their heads. “There is a good deal of shooting down at my little place,” he added. He was not above such a mean act; whereupon the two heads raised themselves by one impulse, as if they had been upon wires, and two pairs of eyes shone. “Try if you can do anything for me, and I’ll do everything I can for you,” this insidious plotter said. The boys shook hands with him with a warmth which they never expected to have felt for any such “spoon,” and said to each other that he didn’t seem such a bad fellow at bottom—as if they had searched his being through and through. Mr. Leigh met Charlie when on his way to the railway station, but he had no encouragement to say anything to Charlie. They passed each other with a nod, very surly on Charlie’s part, whose anger at the sight of him—as if that man had anything to do with *our* trouble—was perhaps not so unnatural. Charlie, too, was going back to Oxford next day, and

thankful to be doing so, out of this dreary place, where there was nothing to do.

It was the afternoon of the next day when Aubrey arrived at his mother's house. It was at some distance from his own house, much too far to drive, and only to be got at by cross-country railways, with an interval of an hour or two of waiting at several junctions, facts which he could not help remembering his poor little wife and her companion had congratulated themselves upon in those old, strange days, which had disappeared so entirely, like a tale that is told. He wondered whether she would equally think it an advantage—if she ever was the partner of his home. There seemed to him now something wrong in the thought, a mean sort of petty feeling, unworthy of a fine nature. He wondered if Bee—Bee! How unlikely it was that she would ever consider that question, or know anything further about his house or his ways of living—she who had thrust him away from her at the very moment when her heart ought to have been most soft—when love was most wanted to strengthen and uphold. Not her father's will, but her own. And your own heart will explain it. His own heart! in which there was nothing but truth and devotion to her.

He arrived thus at his mother's house very depressed in spirits. Mrs. Leigh was not the ordinary kind of mother for a young man like Aubrey Leigh. She was not one of those mothers wholly wrapped up in their children, who are so general. She had

all along made an attempt at an independent life of her own. When Aubrey married she was still a comparatively young woman, by no means disposed to sink her identity in him or his household. Mrs. Aubrey Leigh might possess the first place in the family as the queen regnant, but Mrs. Leigh, in her personality a much more important person, had no idea of being swamped, and giving up her natural consequence. She was still a considerable person, though she was not rich, and inhabited only a sort of jointure-house, a "small place" capable of holding very few visitors. Aubrey was her only son, and she was, of course, very fond of him—*of course*, she was very fond of him—but she had no intention of sinking into insignificance or living only in the reflection of Aubrey, still less of his wife.

Hurstleigh, where Mrs. Leigh lived, was near the sea, and near also to the county town, which was a brisk and thriving seaport. It was an old house that had known many fluctuations, an ancient manor house, inhabited once by the Leighs when they were of humbler pretensions than now; then it became a farm-house, then was let to a hunting man, who greatly enlarged the stables; and now it was a jointure-house, the stables veiled by a new wing, the place in that trim order which denotes a careful master, and more particularly mistress; with large lattice windows, heavy mullions, and a terrace with stone balustrades running all the length of the house. Mrs. Leigh generally sat in a room opening upon this terrace, with the windows always open, except

in the coldest weather, and there it was that Aubrey made his way, without passing through the house. His mother was sitting at one of her favourite occupations—writing letters. She was one of those women who maintain a large correspondence, chiefly for the reason that it amuses them to receive letters and to feel themselves a centre of lively and varied life; besides that, she was considered a very clever letter writer, which is a temptation to everyone who possesses, or is supposed to possess, that qualification. She rose quickly, with a cry of “Aubrey!” in great surprise.

“You are the last person I expected to see,” she said, when she had given him a warm welcome. “I saw the death in the papers, and I supposed, of course, you would be there.”

“I have just come from Kingswarden,” he said, with a little nod of his head in assent; “and yet I was not there.”

“Riddle me no riddles, Aubrey, for I never was good at guessing. You were there and yet you were not there?”

“I am afraid—I am no longer a welcome visitor, mother,” he said, with a faint smile.

“What!” Mrs. Leigh’s astonishment was so great that it seemed to disturb the afternoon quiet which reigned over the whole domain. “What! Why, Aubrey! It was only the other day I heard of your engagement.”

“It is quite true, and yet it has become ancient history, and nobody remembers it any more.”

"What do you mean?" she cried. "My dear Aubrey, I do not understand you. I thought you were dangling about after your young lady, and that this was the reason why I heard so little of you; and then I was much startled to see that announcement in the papers. But you said she was always delicate. Well, but what on earth is the meaning of this other change?"

"I told you, mother. For some time I was but half accepted, pending Colonel Kingsward's decision."

"Oh, yes; one knows what that sort of thing means! And then Colonel Kingsward generously consented—to one of the best matches in England—in your condition of life."

"I am not a young duke, mother."

"No, you are not a young duke. I said in your condition of life, and the Kingswards are nothing superior to that, I believe. Well—and then? That was where your last letter left me."

"I am ashamed not to have written, mother; but it wasn't pleasant news—and I always hoped to change their mind."

"Well? I suppose there was some cause for it?" she said, after waiting a long minute or two for his next words.

He got up and walked to the window, which, as has been intimated, was also a door opening and leading out on to the terrace. "May I shut this

window?" he said, turning his back on her; and then he added, still keeping that attitude, "it was of course because of that old affair."

"What old affair?"

"You generally understand at half a word, mother; must I go into the whole nauseous business?"

She came up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Miss Lance," she said.

"What else? I haven't had so many scandals in my life that you should stand in any doubt."

"Scandals!" she exclaimed; and again was silent for a moment. "Aubrey, explain it to me a little. How did that business come to their ears?"

"Oh, in the easiest way, the simplest way!" he cried. "The injured woman called on the father of the girl who was going to be given to such a reprobate as me." He laughed loudly and harshly, preserving the most tragic face all the time.

"The injured woman! Good heavens! And was the man such an ass—such an ass——?"

"He is not an ass, mother; he is a model of every virtue. My engagement, if you like to call it so, lasted about a week, and then I was suddenly turned adrift."

"Aubrey, when did all this happen?"

"I suppose about three weeks ago. Pardon me, mother, for not having written, but I had no heart to write. I left them at Cologne, and travelled home by myself, and the first thing I did, of course, was to go and see Colonel Kingsward."

"Well?"

"No, it wasn't well at all. He refused to listen to me. Of course, I got it out from my side as well as I could, but it made no difference. He would not hear me. He would understand no excuse."

"And the ladies?"

"Mrs. Kingsward was too gentle and yielding. She never opposed him, and—"

"Aubrey, the girl whom you loved, and had such faith in—Bee, don't you call her?—"

"Bee—stood by me, mother; never hesitated, gave me her hand, and stood by me."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Leigh, with a little sigh of relief, "then that's all right. The father will soon come round—"

"So I should have said yesterday. I left them in that full faith. But since they came back to Kingswarden something has happened. I wrote to her, but I got no answer—I supposed it was her mother's illness—now I have found that he stops my letters; but something far worse—wait a moment—she, Bee herself, wrote to me yesterday, dismissing me without a word of explanation—declaring she did it by her own will, not her father's—and adding, my conscience would tell me why."

Mrs. Leigh looked her son straight in the face for a full minute. "Aubrey—and does your conscience tell you why?"

"No, mother. I am too bewildered even to be able to think—I have not an idea what she means. She knew all there was to know—without under-

standing it in the least, it needn't be said—and held fast to her word; and now I know no more what she means than you do. Mother, there's only one thing to be done—you must take it in hand."

"I——take your love affairs in hand!" she said.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BUT though Mrs. Leigh said this it is by no means certain that she meant it even at the first moment. It is only a very prudent woman who objects to being asked to interfere in a young man's love affairs. Generally the request itself is a compliment, and not less, but perhaps more so, when made to a mother by her son. And Mrs. Leigh, though a sensible and prudent person enough in ordinary affairs, did not attain to the height of virtue above indicated. When she went upstairs to change her gown for dinner, after talking it over and over with Aubrey in every possible point of view, her mind, though she had not yet consented in words, had begun to turn over the best methods of opening the question with the Kingswards, and what it would be wisest in the circumstances to do. That Aubrey should be beaten, that he should have to give up the girl whom he loved, and of whom he gave so exalted a description, seemed the one thing that must not be permitted to be. Mrs. Leigh was very anxious that her son should marry, if it were only to wipe out the episode of that little, silly Amy, who was fonder of her friend than of her husband; and the half ludicrous, half tragic chapter of *that* woman, staying on, resisting all efforts to dislodge her for so long, until she

had as she thought acquired rights over the poor young man, who was not strong-minded enough to turn her out of his house. To obliterate these circumstances from the mind of the county altogether, as could only be done by a happy and suitable marriage, Mrs. Leigh would have done much, and, to be sure, her son's happiness was also dear to her. Poor Aubrey! His first adventure into life had not been a happy one, and his descriptions of Bee and all her belongings had been full of a young lover's enthusiasm, not tame and tepid as she had always felt his sentiments towards Amy to be. What would it be best to do if I really undertake this business, she said to herself. Herself replied that it was not a business for her to meddle with, that she would do no good, and many other dissuasions of the conventional kind; but, when her imagination and feelings were once lit up, Mrs. Leigh was not a woman to be smothered in that way. After dinner, without still formally undertaking the mission, she talked with Aubrey of the best ways of carrying it out. If she did interfere, how should she set about it? "Mind, I don't promise anything, but supposing ——" Should she write? Should she go? Which thing would it be best to do? If she made up her mind to go, should she write beforehand to warn them? What, on the whole, would it be most appropriate to do?

The method finally decided upon between them — "if I go—but I don't say that I will go—" was that Mrs. Leigh should first, without warning or preparation, endeavour to see Bee, and ascertain whether

any new representations had been made to her to change her mind; and then, according to her success or non-success with Bee, decide whether she should ask an interview with her father. Aubrey slept under his mother's roof with greater tranquility and refreshment than he had known for some time, and with something of the vague hope of his childhood that she could set everything right, do away with punishment or procure pleasure, when she took it in hand. It had always been so in the childish days, which seemed to come near him in the sight of the old furniture, the well-known pictures and ornaments and curiosities which Mrs. Leigh had brought with her when she settled in this diminished house. How well he remembered them all!—the old print of the little Samuel on his knees, the attitude of which he used half-consciously to copy when he said his prayers; the little old-fashioned books in blue and brown morocco on the shelves, the china ornaments on the mantel-piece. He smiled at their antiquity now-a-days, but he had thought them very grand and imposing once upon a time.

In the morning Mrs. Leigh coquetted a little, or else saw the whole subject in a colder light. "Don't you think it is possible that I might do more harm than good," she said; "things might settle of themselves if you only give them a little time. Colonel Kingsward would come to his senses, and Miss Bee—"

"Mother," cried Aubrey, pale with alarm, "on the contrary. Do you forget the circumstances? Mrs.

Kingsward is dead, there is a large family of little children, and Bee is of the race of the Quixotes. Don't you see what will happen? She will get it into her mind, and everybody will persuade her, that as the eldest daughter she is wanted at home. It will be impressed upon her on all sides, and unless there is a strong influence to counteract it, and at once, Bee is lost to me for ever."

"My dear, don't be so tragical. These dreadful things don't happen in our days."

"You may laugh, mother, but it is no laughing matter to me."

"I don't laugh," she said. "I see the strength of your argument; but, my dear boy, nothing will be so effectual in showing your Bee the happiness that is awaiting her as a little trial of the troubles of a large family on her shoulders. I know what it is."

Aubrey sprang from his seat though it was in the middle of his breakfast. "Mother," he said, "there is one thing that I believe you will never know—and that is, Bee. The burden is exactly what will hold her fast beyond any argument—the sense of duty—the feeling that she is bound to take her mother's place."

What was in Mrs. Leigh's mind was the thought: Ah, that's all very well at first, till she has tried it. But what she said was: "I beg your pardon, Aubrey. Of course, that is a much more elevated feeling. Sit down, my dear, and take your breakfast. It is not my fault that I don't know Bee."

Upon which Aubrey had to beg her pardon and

sit down, commiserating her for that deficiency, which was indeed her misfortune and not her fault.

At the end Mrs. Leigh was wound up to take the strongest step possible. She joined her son in London after about a week had elapsed. He chafed at the delay, but allowed that to leave Bee in quiet for a few days after all the storms that had gone over her head was necessary. Mrs. Leigh went down early on a bright October morning to Kingswarden with much more excitement than she had expected to feel. She was herself inclined to take a lighter view, to laugh at the idea of interrupted letters or parental cruelty, and to believe that poor Bee was worn out, her nerves all wrong, and possibly her temper affected by the irritability which is so apt to accompany unaccustomed grief, and that in a little time she would of herself come round. Seeing, however, that these suggestions only made Aubrey angry, she had given them up, and was in fact more influenced than she cared to show by his emotion and anxiety when she thus sallied forth into the unknown to plead her son's cause. They had ascertained that Colonel Kingsward had returned to his office, so the coast was clear. Only the two girls and the little children were at home. Mrs. Leigh said to herself as she walked to the gate that it was a shame to take the little girl, poor little thing, thus unprotected, with nobody to stand by her. If it were not that it was entirely for her good—nobody that knew Aubrey would deny that he would make the best husband in the world, and surely to have a good house of her own, and a

good husband, and distinct place in the world was better than to grow to maturity a harassed woman at the head of her father's house, acting mother to a troop of children who would not obey her, nor even be grateful for her kindness to them. Surely there could not be two opinions as to what it would be best for the girl to do. Yet she felt a little like a wolf going down into the midst of the lambkins when she opened the unguarded gate.

Mrs. Leigh was a clever woman, and a woman of the world. She had a great deal of natural understanding, and a considerable knowledge of life, but she was not unlike in appearance the ordinary British matron, who is not much credited with these qualities. That is to say, she was stout—which is a calamity common with the kind. She had white hair, considerably frizzed on the top of the forehead, as it is becoming to white hair to be, and dark eyes and good complexion. These things were in her favour; still, it is impossible to deny that when Bee and Betty saw coming towards them, following the footman across the lawn, a stout figure, not very tall, nor distinguishable from various ladies in both country and town whom they knew, and with the natural impertinence of youth set down as bores, they had both a strong revolt in their minds against their visitor. “Oh, who is it—who is it?” they said to each other. “Why did James let her in? Why did he let anyone in?”

It was a warm morning, though the season was far advanced, and they were seated again on that

bench under the tree where they had watched the white cloud floating away on the night of their mother's death. They went there instinctively whenever they went out. "Mother's tree," they began to call it, and sat as she had been used to do, with the children playing near, and nurse walking up and down with the baby in her arms. They had been talking more that morning than ever before. It was little more than a week since Mrs. Kingsward's funeral, but they were so young that their hearts now and then for a moment burst the bondage of their sorrow, and escaped the length of a smile or two. It was not much; and, to be sure, for the children's sake it was indispensable that they should not be crying and miserable always, as at first they had felt as if they must continually be. But it was another thing to receive visitors and have perhaps to answer questions about the circumstances of their loss.

"Mrs.—? what did James say?" Neither of them were sure, though a thrill ran through Bee's veins. It was a stranger. Who could it be?

"I have to apologise for coming—without knowing you—and at such a time," said Mrs. Leigh, making a little pause till the nurse had got to the end of the gravel walk with the baby, and James was out of hearing. "It is you who are Bee, is it not?" she said, suddenly taking the girl's hands. "I am the mother of Aubrey Leigh."

All the colour went out of Bee's face; she drew away her hands hurriedly, and dropped upon her

mother's seat. She felt that she had no power to say a word.

"Oh, I thought it was Mrs. Leigh he said," cried Betty, "but I could not suppose—oh, Mrs. Leigh, whatever Bee may say, I am so glad to see you—perhaps you will be able to make things right."

"I hope I shall," said Mrs. Leigh, "and I shall always be obliged to you, my dear, for giving me your countenance. But your sister does not look as if she meant to let me put things right."

"I am sorry if I seem rude," said Bee, gathering herself together, "but—I don't think that papa would like us to receive visitors."

"I am not a common visitor," said Mrs. Leigh. "I hope you will do me the credit to think that it is with a very different feeling I come. I am very, very sorry for you, so young as you are—more sorry than I can say. And, Bee, if indeed I am to hope to be one day your mother—"

Bee did not speak; but she fixed her blue eyes upon her visitor with a sort of entreaty to be left alone, and mournfully shook her head.

"We can't think just now of that name," said little Betty, with the tears standing in her eyes.

"My dear children, I came to try to comfort you, not to open your wounds. Dear," she said, putting her hand on Bee's shoulder, "you would not see Aubrey, nor let him have a word from you. But he said you had heard everything an evil woman could say, and did not give him up for that—and he is heart-broken. He thought perhaps you would tell

me if he had done anything to displease you—or if it was only the effect of your grief, to which he would be submissive at once. All he wanted was to share your trouble, my dear child.”

This was not at all what Mrs. Leigh intended to say. She had meant to represent her visit as one of sympathy solely, without at first referring to the hard case of Aubrey; but Bee’s looks had confused even this experienced woman. The girl’s pale face put on an expression of determined decision, or rather of that blank of resistance to entering upon the question, which is a kind of defence which it is almost impossible to break down.

“I would rather, if you please, not say anything of Mr. Leigh.”

“Dear child! Do not take that tone. If he has done anything that does not please you, how is he ever to clear himself if you will not tell him what it is.”

“She is like this all the time,” cried Betty; “she will not say what is wrong—and yet she is just as miserable herself as anyone could be.”

Bee gave her sister a look in which Mrs. Leigh, closely watching, saw the lightening of the glance, the brilliancy and splendour of the blue eyes of which Aubrey had raved. Poor little Betty was illuminated as if with a great flame. It was all that she could do to restrain a very inappropriate smile. “You know nothing, and how do you dare to say anything?” Bee said.

“I am sure that Bee is just,” said the older lady.

"She would not condemn anyone unheard. Aubrey Leigh is my son, but we have been separated for many years, and I think I judge him impartially. He does not always please me, and I am sure that at some time or other he has much displeased you. Your eyes tell me, though you have not said a word. But, my dear, I have never, since he was a child, found him out in anything except the one thing you know, in which he was so sorely, sorely tried. He has always been kind. He gets into trouble by his kindness as other men do by ill-behaviour. I don't know what you have against him, but I feel sure that he will clear himself if you will let him speak. Bee——"

"I do not want," cried Bee, "to seem rude. Oh, I don't want to be rude! I am sure, quite sure, that you are kind; but I have nothing to say, oh! nothing to say to anyone. I am not able to discuss any subject, or enter into things. I have a great deal to think of, for I am the eldest and it will not do for me to—to break down, or to have any more to bear. I am very, very sorry—and you are so kind. But I must go in now—I must go in now."

"Bee, Bee——"

"You can stay, Betty, and talk to the lady. You can stay, but—oh, forgive me—I cannot—cannot help it! I must go in now."

This was the end of Mrs. Leigh's embassy. She had a long talk with Betty, who was but too glad to pour into this kind woman's bosom all her troubles. Betty could not tell what had happened to Bee.

She was not the Bee of old, and she did not know what it was that had happened about Aubrey, or if Bee had heard anything against him. She was as much in the dark as Mrs. Leigh herself. But she made it very evident that Bee had a grievance, a real or supposed ground of complaint which made her very angry, and which she resented bitterly. What was it? But this Betty did not know.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. LEIGH went back to her son with a sense of humiliation which was rare in her consciousness. She had been completely unsuccessful, which was a thing which had very rarely happened to her. She had expected if she got admission at all that anything which so young a girl might have on her mind must have burst forth and all have been made clear. She had expected at once to overawe and to soothe a young creature who loved Aubrey, and who had some untold grievance against Aubrey. But she was not prepared for the dual personality, so to speak, of Bee, or the power she had of retreating, herself, and leaving her little sister as her representative to fulfil all necessary civilities without the power of betraying anything that the visitor wanted to know. She went back to town very angry with Bee; turned against her; very little disposed to sympathise with Aubrey, which she had so freely done before. "My dear boy," she said, "you have made a mistake, that's all. The elder sister has a temper like her father. Everybody will tell you that Colonel Kingsward is a sharp-tempered man. But Betty is a little darling. It is she that should have been the mistress of Forest-leigh."

In answer to this, Aubrey simply turned his back

upon his mother. He was deeply disappointed, but this speech turned his disappointment into a kind of rage. She had mismanaged the whole matter. That was as clear as daylight, and such a suggestion was an added insult. Betty! a child—a little girl—a nobody. His Bee seemed to tower over her in his imagination, so different, so high above her, another species. It was some minutes before he could trust himself to speak.

“Of course, you think me a fool,” said Mrs. Leigh, “and so I am, to tell a young man that there is another in the world equal to the object of his fancy.”

“Mother,” said Aubrey, in a choked voice, “you mistake the matter altogether. That is not what is in question. What I want to know is, what has been said against me, what new thing she has heard, or in what new light she has been taught to see me. You might as well suggest,” he cried, angrily, “that another person might have been better in your place—as in hers.”

“If that is all I don’t mind allowing it,” said Mrs. Leigh, with an aggravation peculiar to mothers. “You might have had some one who would have been, all round, of more use to you as a mother—only it’s a little late to think of that. However, without any persiflage, here is one thing evident, that she has some grievance against you, something new, something definite, which she believes you to be conscious of, which she is too proud to discuss—I suppose?” said Mrs. Leigh, looking at him with the

look of the too-profoundly experienced, never sure how far human weakness may go.

"Mother!" Aubrey cried. He was as indignant as she was unassured.

"Well, my dear, don't be angry. I am not imagining anything. I only ask whether you are quite sure that there is nothing which might be twisted into a new accusation against you? There might be many incidents, in which you were quite blameless, which an enemy might twist—"

"You need not be melo-dramatic, mother. I have nothing in the world that could be an enemy—so far as I know."

"Oh, as for that, there are people who make up stories out of pure devilry. And I had no intention of being melo-dramatic," said Mrs. Leigh with displeasure. She added, after a moment, "Examine—I don't say your conscience, which probably has nothing to do with it—but what has occurred for the last six months? See if there is anything which admits of a wrong interpretation, which could be, as I say, twisted."

Aubrey paused a moment to attempt to do as she said, but the little episode of the railway station, the poor woman and her babies, he did not think of. If truth must be told, he thought that incident was one of the most creditable things in his life. He felt a little pleased with himself when he thought of it. It was one of those things which to mention might seem like a brag of his own generosity. He

felt that it was really one of the few incidents in his life which modesty kept him from telling, one of the things in which the right hand should not know what the left hand did. Had he thought of it that would have been his feeling; but when he was asked suddenly to endeavour to recollect something which might be twisted to his disadvantage, naturally this good deed—a deed of charity if ever one was—did not come into his mind at all. He shook his head. “You know whether I am that kind of man, mother.”

“Don’t refer it to me, Aubrey—a young man’s mother probably is the very last person to know. I know you, my dear, *au fond*. I know a great deal about you; but I know, too, that you have done many things which I never could have supposed you would have done: consult your own recollection. Probably it is something so insignificant that you will have difficulty in recalling it. One can never calculate what trifle may move a young girl’s imagination. A grain of sand is enough to put a watch all wrong.”

Thus it will be seen that Mrs. Leigh’s long experience was after all good for something. She divined the character of the dreadful obstacle which had come in her son’s way and shattered all his hopes. If he had recounted to her that incident which it would have seemed ostentation to him to refer to, probably she would have pierced the *imbroglia* at once—or could she have seen into his life and his memory, she would, no doubt, have put her finger at once on that place. But there they stood,

two human creatures in the closest relation to each other that nature can make, anxious to find out between them the key to a puzzle which neither of them could divine, but the secret of which lay certainly between them, could they but find it—and could make out nothing. A word from the son might have set the keen-witted mother, better acquainted than he with the manner in which scandals arise, on the scent. But it never occurred to him to say that word. They looked into each other's faces and made out nothing. Strange veil of individuality which is between two human creatures, as the sea is between two worlds, and more confusing, more impenetrable still than any distance! Aubrey made the most conscientious efforts to lay bare his heart, to discover something that might be twisted, as she said; but he found nothing. His thoughts since he met the Kingswards first had been full of nothing but Bee—his very dreams had been full of her. He wandered vaguely through his own recollections, not knowing what to look for—what was there? There was nothing. His mother sat by, and, notwithstanding her anxiety, could scarcely refrain from smiling at his puzzled, troubled endeavour to find out something against himself. But there was nothing to find out. He shook his head at last, with a sort of appeal to her out of his troubled eyes. He was distressed not to find what he sought. "I know nothing," he said, shaking his head. "One never does anything very good indeed—but not very bad either. I have just been as I always am—not

much to brag of—but nothing to be ashamed of, between one man and another.”

“The question is between one man and one woman, Aubrey, which is different.”

“Then,” he cried, with a short laugh, “I defy discovery. There has been nothing in all my thoughts that need have been hidden. You do me grievous wrong, mother, if you can think—even if I had been inclined that way.”

“I don’t think. I have the most complete faith in you, Aubrey. I say—anything that could be twisted by a malign interpretation?”

He shook his head again. “And who would take the trouble to make a malign interpretation? I assure you, I have no enemy.”

“Colonel Kingsward is enemy enough.”

“Ah! Colonel Kingsward. I have no reason, however, to think that he would do a dishonourable action.”

“What do you call intercepting letters, Aubrey?”

“It is very antiquated and out of date, but I don’t know that it need be called dishonourable; and he has a high idea of his authority; but to make a false representation of another man——”

“Aubrey, these distinctions are too fine for me. There is only one thing that I can do. I will now go and interview Colonel Kingsward. If he knows of anything new, he will soon reveal it to me. If he goes only over the old ground, then we may be sure that your *fiancée* has been told something in her own ear—something apart from her father—which she

has betrayed to no one. Unless, perhaps, it was got from the mother——”

“Not a word about the mother. She is dead, and she is sacred; and besides she was the last, the very last——”

“You have yourself said she was very weak, Aubrey.”

“Weak so far as resisting her husband was concerned, but incapable of an unkind word; incapable of any treachery or falsehood; a creature, both in body and soul, whom you could almost see through.”

Mrs. Leigh shook her head a little.

“I know those transparent people,” she said. “They are not always so—— But never mind; I am going to interview Colonel Kingsward now.”

Colonel Kingsward was very courteous to his visitor. He received her visit of sympathy with polite gratitude, accepting her excuse that so nearly connected as the families had been about to be, she could not be in town without coming to express her great regret and feeling for his family left motherless. Colonel Kingsward was very *digne*. He had the fullest sense of what was expected in his position, and he did not allow any other feeling to come in the way of that. He thanked Mrs. Leigh for her sympathy, and exaggerated his sense of her goodness in coming to express it. It was more, much more, than he had any right to expect. If there was any alleviation to his grief it was in the sense of the great kindness of friends——“and even of strangers,”

he said, with a grave bow, which seemed to throw Mrs. Leigh indefinitely back into the regions of the unknown. This put her on her mettle at once.

"I do not feel like a stranger," she said. "I have heard so much of your family—every member of it—through my son, Aubrey. I regret greatly that the connection which seemed to be so suitable should hang at all in doubt——"

"It does not hang in doubt," said Colonel Kingsward, "I am sorry if you have got that impression. It is quite broken off—once for all."

"That is a hard thing to say to Aubrey Leigh's mother," she said; "such a stigma should not be put upon a young man lightly."

"I am sorry to discuss such matters with a lady. But I don't know what you call lightly, Mrs. Leigh. I do not believe for a moment that you would give a daughter of your own—I don't know whether you have daughters of your own——"

"Two—happily married, thank heaven, and off my hands."

"You will understand me so much the better. (Colonel Kingsward knew perfectly well all about Mrs. Leigh's two daughters.) I do not believe that you would have given one of them to a man—to whom another lady put forth a prior claim."

"I am not at all sure of that. I should have ascertained first what kind of person put forth the claim——"

"We need not go into these details," said Colonel Kingsward, waving his hand.

"It is most important to go into these details. I can give you every particular about this lady, Colonel Kingsward; and so can a dozen people, at least, who have no interest in the matter except to tell the truth."

"The question is closed in my mind, Mrs. Leigh. I have no intention of opening it again."

"And this is the sole ground upon which my son is rejected?" she said, fixing her keen eyes upon his face.

"It is the sole ground; it is quite enough, I believe. Supposing even that the lady was everything you allege, an intimacy between a woman of that character and your son is quite enough to make him unsuitable for my daughter."

"Who is not of your opinion, however," Mrs. Leigh said.

Colonel Kingsward was confused by this speech. He got up and stood before the fire. He avoided meeting her eye. "My daughter is very young and very inexperienced," he said. "She is at present more moved by her feelings than her reason. I believe that with an increase of maturer judgment she will fully adopt my view."

Colonel Kingsward believed that he had altogether crushed his visitor, but he was not so right as he thought. Mrs. Leigh went back to her son with triumph in her eyes. "He knows nothing more," she said. "He does not know that she has turned against you. Whatever is her reason, it is something different from his, and she has not confided it to him.

I thought as much when you told me of the letters stopped. A man does not intercept a girl's letters when he knows she has come round to his way of thinking. Now you have got to find out what she has heard, and to set her right about it whatever it may be."

END OF VOL. I.

I thought as much when you told me the thing
suggested. A man does not know what he is doing
when he knows the law is against him. I am not
thinking. Now you have got to find out what the
law is, and to let her fight about it as she
may see fit.

END OF VOL. I.

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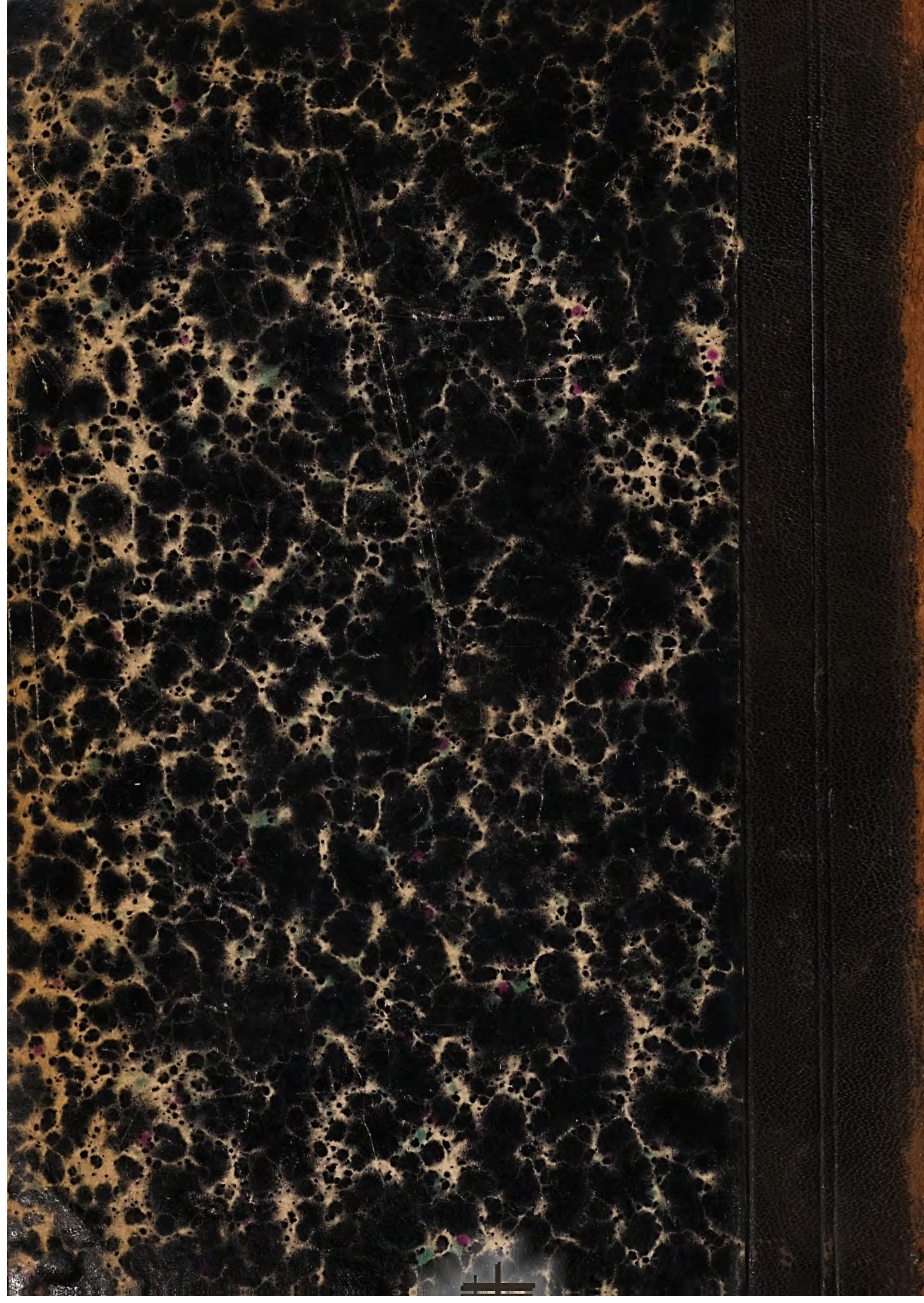
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